

The book cover features a close-up portrait of a woman with long, wavy, reddish-brown hair and light-colored eyes. She is looking slightly to the left with a serious expression. The background is a dark teal color with a subtle, textured pattern of fine lines. The title 'OMEGA' is written in large, bold, pink letters with a distressed, splattered texture. Below it, the author's name 'DYLAN ST. JAMES' is written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. At the bottom, the words 'CONCEALED' and 'ELIZABETH DEAR' are written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters, with 'CONCEALED' being significantly larger than 'ELIZABETH DEAR'.

DYLAN ST. JAMES

OMEGA

CONCEALED

ELIZABETH
DEAR

**DYLAN ST. JAMES: OMEGA
CONCEALED**

ELIZABETH DEAR



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*To K. Panikian, L.K. Farlow, and Morgan B for shoving me
very forcefully in the direction of this genre.*

SYNOPSIS

Packs are pain and bonds are fucking shackles.

With the government issuing omega females to Alpha packs like we're social security checks, I cling to my freedom thanks to a black-market suppressant hookup and a lethal family that's ready to execute any Alpha who tries to force a bond.

By day, I work in the family hardware store. By night, I rescue omegas who weren't born with the tools to fight the system like I was.

My life is risk, but I'd never trade it for anything.

Not even for the three dangerously gorgeous men who come sniffing around the store in search of the omega I just snatched from her abusive prison.

Not even when those men smell like they're *mine*.

But my suppressant hookup just fell through, and I'm on the fast track to a pheromone explosion that will land me in jail, followed by forced bonding.

Or I could just give my body what it so desperately wants and fall into the convenient arms of Austin, Seth, and Cameron.

But outside of the fairytales? There's no such thing as a happily bonded omega.

I'm Dylan St. James, and I'm no princess.

*This is a New Adult, M/M/F/M Omegaverse romance. It is Book 1 in a duology and will end on a cliffhanger. As always with my books, this is for readers age **18+** and contains a ton of foul language, steamy scenes, and violent themes. A full list of content warnings can be found in the Author's Note at the front of the book. Happy reading!*

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Guys, I'm aware that I can't pick a lane. I really am.

But the muse wants what she wants, and she wanted a Why Choose contemporary Omegaverse romance, but make it an Elizabeth-Dear-style heroine.

We're going with it. If you're an ED vet, the story and the characters should still feel familiar. If you're new to the Omegaverse genre, I've got a quick primer on it in the next section.

If you're new to me, welcome! This is my first Omegaverse series, so be gentle. The tone of this particular series is on the darker side, but the darkness is more in the world and the external conflict than in the romance itself. I try to keep levity and humor in all of my stories, and I don't like to torture my main characters. You're guaranteed a happy ending and fun along the way.

A reminder that this is a **Why Choose** romance, meaning our heroine will have multiple love interests and will not have to choose between them. There is also an established M/M relationship in the group, so there will be swords crossing along with lots of love for our heroine.

This is a duology—two books to complete Dylan’s story. We will be a slow burn that ignites considerably in Book 2. Plot girlies unite!

Content warnings: discussion of domestic violence, sexual assault, and abuse occurring off-page and in the past, not applicable to any main character. Mention of suicide in family history, off-page and in the past. Vague discussion of infertility. Gun violence, mild gore, and mayhem. Dystopian themes, including government control of women’s bodies and trafficking of women and girls.

Dubcon: If you’re new to Omegaverse stories, please be aware that readers often feel that there is a dubious consent element to the “requirements” of omega biology. I do my very best to work consent into Dylan’s relationship with our male leads, but it is a major theme of the book that Dylan’s body makes demands that she would rather it did not. I personally do not consider any sexual situation between our leads to be dubcon, but I also acknowledge that opinions can differ.

Thank you for picking up this story, and I hope you enjoy.

- *Elizabeth*

WHAT IS OMEGEVERSE?

Like many great things, Omegaverse originated in fanfiction and has made its way into indie romance with gusto.

Takes on Omegaverse are as varied as the authors that create the stories within it, but there are some common tropes and themes you can generally expect to find. For the uninitiated, I'll describe Omegaverse as I've chosen to present it in this series.

Omegaverse is, at its core, an alternate universe where humans have different biology than they do in the real world. Specifically, people are born and later present as either an Alpha, a beta, or an omega.

Alphas are the biggest, strongest, and most dominant of the designations. They're the leaders, the elite soldiers, the pinnacle of society. They tend to form "packs" with one another, and at their center is an omega. Omegas are the biologically perfect mates of an Alpha pack—they're rare, they're feminine, they're fertile, and they smell hella good to an Alpha.

Betas are your regular humans living regular human lives, though in my version of Omegaverse, betas have a slightly

enhanced sense of smell and a rapidly declining fertility rate.

A key component of the biology of Omegaverse is an individual's scent and how it affects others. Alpha and omega pheromones drive some primal and intrinsic desires between the two designations, specifically for bonding and mating purposes. Omegas experience "heats" and need their Alphas to tend to them during (yes, in a sexy way). Alphas are hardwired to want nothing more than to rut their omega into oblivion and then bond with them forever. Everyone has a little extra something going on in their *parts* for a match made in Omegaverse heaven.

In my version of this world, Alphas are usually men and omegas are usually women, though there are rare exceptions.

Sound familiar? If you've read any shifter romance, I don't think you'll find it all that hard to follow. But note—this is a contemporary story, which means there are no shifters, no real "magic" or paranormal elements beyond the fantastical biology of Omegaverse. These are modern humans living in an alternate version of our modern world.

I'll let Dylan explain the specifics to you. Happy reading!

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF PACK UNIFICATION ORDER

NO. 1999-045

The USDPU issues this Order No. 1999-045, effective August 31, 1999, in response to the National Emergency declared by Congress on June 30, 1999.

The beta female birth rate has reached a critical low. Omega female fertility remains high, but overall births from bonded omega females have declined as females presenting with the omega designation have become rarer. This has caused the birth rate of males presenting as Alpha designation to decline to a historic low.

Congress has determined that the government has a compelling interest in boosting the overall national birth rate, with particular emphasis on increasing the rate of children most likely to present as Alpha. American exceptionalism is at risk without a healthy new generation of soldiers, innovators, and leaders in both business and government.

Crucial to this endeavor is promoting Alpha pack formation and matching omega females with a compatible pack.

The government also has a compelling interest in protecting the safety of omega-presenting citizens. The increase in unbonded omegas past the age of majority has caused a documented surge in Alpha violence that has resulted in injury to others and extensive property damage.

Effective as of the date of this Order, the USDPU will require registration of all omega citizens with their local

USDPU office at the time of presentation of omega designation. The Department will work to match all registered omega citizens with a suitable Alpha pack by the age of majority and prior to the onset of a first heat.

Failure to comply with this Order by parents of minors presenting as omega and omega citizens aged seventeen and older may result in both civil and criminal penalties. Congress has authorized the imposition of fines of up to \$75,000 per violation and up to ten years in prison for willful and intentional misconduct.

This Order does not apply to omega citizens aged twenty-three and younger who are accepted for admission to a certified Omega Finishing School (OFS). Congress has agreed to continue to allow each OFS to oversee the courting process for its students and vetted Alpha packs.

Please direct any questions regarding this Order to Herald Jackson, Alpha, Secretary of the USDPU.

DYLAN

The breath whooshed from my chest as I landed in the large rectangular planter box mounted below Sally's bedroom window. I'd jumped over to the box from a limb of the nearby pecan tree in the Brown Pack's backyard easily enough, but I hadn't exactly been *certain* the aging planter would hold my weight.

"I heard a creak," Derrick said warily. My twin brother waited in the shadows of said pecan tree in the yard below, his voice amplified by the earbud I wore in my right ear. "I told you this plan was stupid."

"I didn't hear you coming up with a better one," I hissed back as I tapped lightly on the windowpane, giving Sally the signal. "This isn't one of our smash-and-grabs in the trailer parks down south. We can't just kick the fucking door down in Whitetail Hills."

"Says who?"

"Will you two focus?" Daisy's droll voice cut in. "Every single one of these fancy-ass houses has multiple security cameras, and the neighbor across the street is definitely still awake. We need to get moving."

Trust the fifteen-year-old to be the voice of reason in this operation. She'd tucked herself into a neighbor's shrub out in front of the house to monitor the street. She would sound the alarm if the three Brown Pack Alphas who'd left for the bar half an hour ago returned unexpectedly early.

I crouched in my box, my boots digging into the dry, bare soil. A woman appeared in the window, her nervous face illuminated by the pale moonlight. She inched the window open, taking great care not to make a sound.

Not a woman—a girl, I thought as I took in her baggy pink hoodie and sparkly leggings. Sally was only seventeen, after all, matched by USDPU with the Brown Pack the minute she reached the age of majority. It only took a few months after that for her to disappear from her high school.

“Hi, Sally,” I whispered. “I’m Dylan. Are you ready to go?”

Her nostrils flared and her eyes widened as she got a whiff of my scent—or lack thereof. Her jaw dropped, and then she gave me a look of such profound hope, I felt my chest pinch.

The omega girls we helped were made aware of my designation because it helped to establish trust. But many didn’t believe that I was able to present as nothing but an ordinary, run-of-the-mill beta female until they smelled me with their own noses.

It was a life we offered to them, too, if they wanted it.

“Yes, I’m ready,” she replied. “They locked me in like usual, and I pushed my dresser against the door like you guys said to. Don’s playing video games in his room with his headset on, so hopefully he won’t notice anything.”

Don was an abusive dickhead, just like his other three pack brothers. I almost hoped he joined us so I could introduce my boot to his face.

“Good work,” I told her with an encouraging smile. “Do you think you can climb into this totally stable planter box with me?”

“If it breaks, you’re on your own,” Derrick muttered in my ear. “I can only catch one of you.”

I ignored him, not wanting to alarm our already-frightened omega. She shouldered her small backpack and grabbed the hand I held out to her, then she crawled tentatively out of the window and joined me in the box.

“Okay, here’s what’s going to happen,” I whispered to her. “My brother, Derrick, is in the yard right below us. I’m going to help you over the side, and he’ll catch you.”

She let out a tiny gasp. “What? I’m just supposed to... fall down?”

“He’s got you, I promise. It’s only two stories, and he’s very strong.”

And Sally was tiny—the ideal omega girl. Five-foot-one, fine-boned, and slender except for a generous curve to her hips and bust that radiated feminine fertility. Her sweet strawberry-pie scent would’ve been like crack to any Alpha.

It was no wonder the Brown Pack snatched her up the second she was eligible to be bonded, her impoverished background be damned. They were an up-and-coming young pack with money to spend, but they’d gone through the USDPU process because they lacked the exorbitant wealth and pedigree required to court an Omega Finishing School snowflake. Their deep pockets and pretty house had allowed them to easily snag their top choice.

At any rate, Derrick would catch Sally no problem, tiny thing that she was, even if she’d jumped off the roof.

My dedication to taking very illegal hormone suppressants from the second my designation made itself known at puberty allowed me to grow tall and put on enough muscle to feel confident enough to punch an Alpha in the face. Derrick would not be catching me like a delicate princess falling from her tower.

Sally peered over the side of the box. Derrick stepped out of the shadows into a strategic spot underneath us, and he gave her a little wave.

I felt her tense next to me.

“Yes, he’s an Alpha, but you’re nowhere near your heat, and even if you were, he has iron-clad control. He’s not interested in bonding an omega and never will be.”

“Oh, okay then,” she said, sucking in a breath. Not like she had a choice anyway. “I’m ready.”

I steadied her as she climbed over the side. “Derrick, package coming down in three, two, one—”

“Sally!” a deep voice boomed behind us through the open window. Fists pounded on the bedroom door, quickly followed by the violent crashing of the door as it jammed up against Sally’s dresser. “Sally! What the fuck? Open this door right the fuck now!”

Sally let out a terrified squeak.

“Time’s up!” I barked, then I gave her a light shove over the side of our perch.

She gave a real shriek this time, and a loud *oomph* announced she’d landed safely in Derrick’s arms.

“Package secure,” he grunted. He took off toward the back gate, a terrified Sally clinging to his neck. My truck was waiting, parked in the alley behind the house where the residents of this block of Whitetail Hills left their trashcans for collection.

Behind me, the door crashed open, the sounds of the dresser scraping the hardwood floor ripping into my eardrums.

“What the fuck is this?” Don shouted as he barreled into Sally’s room.

I pulled my balaclava over my nose and mouth before I turned to give him the finger.

He gaped at me. I waved, then I spun and launched myself off the planter box, the crack of the frame coming loose from the side of the house announcing I’d only narrowly avoided the world’s most annoying “I told you so” from Derrick. I crashed onto a thick tree limb with a painful thud.

“Uh, the lights came on downstairs,” Daisy said in my ear. “Oh shit, here comes Alpha douche-bro flying down the stairs like his ass is on fire.”

I groaned as I hung from the limb. “Yeah, we’re busted. I’ll stall. Derrick, is she safe in the truck?”

“Strapping her in now.”

With a mighty heave, I swung myself down to a lower limb, then shimmied down the trunk far enough to jump the rest of the way to the ground. “Daisy, time to bail,” I said. “Meet us in the alley.”

The sound of the house’s back door slamming open echoed like a gunshot through the slumbering neighborhood. Don barreled into the yard, his head on a swivel and his nostrils flaring like a bull’s as he searched frantically for Sally.

The moment his wild gaze locked on me, I charged.

I wore my pistol on my belt and had several knives and other fun things hidden under the black fleece vest I wore, but Don was bringing nothing to this fight but a pair of flannel pajama pants and the Greek letters of his old frat tattooed across his bare chest.

Wouldn’t really be fair to just pull a knife and gut him. Plus, that definitely was not in the plan. Dad would have a coronary.

For a split second, his eyes widened in surprise, no doubt clocking that I was a female. Seizing that moment of hesitation, I dropped and baseball-slid into his legs.

“Fuck!” he bellowed, toppling like a tree as I knocked him off his feet. Don was big like most Alpha males—several inches over six feet tall, inflated with the muscle he was able to maintain simply by winning the genetic lottery, but he was also a lazy asshole who was slow, out of shape, and had the reflexes of a guy three beers in.

I rolled, bounced to my feet, then leveled a hard kick to his ribs as he lay face down in the dirt.

He groaned. “Fuck you, bitch. Where the fuck is my omega?”

“Gone. Don’t look for her.”

“She’s our bonded omega!” He shoved off the ground and climbed to standing. I stepped back to avoid the spittle shower as he barked, “We paid good fucking money for her. My pack will find her, and then we’ll find *you*, beta bitch. You’re a dead girl walking.”

I let him talk—the longer I stalled, the better.

Daisy's quiet voice popped into my ear. "I'm headed down the alley now. Sixty seconds."

Don advanced on me, murder in his eyes.

I walked backward, taking slow, careful steps toward the back gate. "You'll never find her," I taunted. "And if you abusive fucks somehow manage to buy another poor omega girl, I'll be back. Count on it."

He roared, surging forward and slinging a clumsy punch at my head.

I ducked and slammed the heel of my gloved hand right into his nose. It broke with a deeply satisfying crunch.

"Fuck!" he howled, his meaty hands flying to his face as blood began to seep through his fingers.

"Now, Dylan," Derrick rumbled in my ear.

I kicked Don in the stomach one more time before I turned on my heel and bolted toward the back gate.

The gate popped open, Derrick holding it just wide enough for me to slip through. He slammed it shut after me, then jogged behind my truck just in time to meet Daisy as she sprinted down the narrow dirt road of the alley. She'd refused the baseball cap Derrick and I both wore, her straw-blond hair flapping wildly just above her shoulders as she ran. Derrick and I also had on dark thermal shirts, matching tactical pants, and hiking boots, while Daisy had shown up to tonight's job in a green hoodie, gray leggings, and her Crocs.

I hurried to the driver's side door of my truck, wrenched it open, and jumped into the front seat. I whirled around in my seat to watch out my back window as Derrick crouched next to the back fence of the house behind the Browns', holding his hands low to make a step. Daisy didn't break stride as she bounded onto Derrick's waiting hands, and then he launched her over the fence. She grabbed the top of the wooden slats and vaulted over with the grace of a gymnast, and then Derrick followed, muscling his way over with only slightly less finesse.

They would snake their way through the dark yards of the sleeping families of Whitetail Hills until they reached Derrick's truck parked several blocks away. Then they'd head home, report to Dad, and get the good night's sleep I would not.

Satisfied they were away safe, I turned back to the wheel and jammed my finger into the ignition button. The truck came to life, and I turned to my passenger. "Ready, Sally?"

She nodded mutely, clutching her backpack like a lifeline as a tremble shook her slight frame.

I gunned it, speeding out of the alley and onto the cross street. Right before we peeled out onto the road, I caught sight of the Browns' gate flying open in my rearview.

We were away before Don could stumble from out behind it to get eyes on the getaway car.

A little close, but a success.

DYLAN

When we'd made it out of Whitetail Hills, across the city, and onto the Texas state highway headed northwest, I allowed myself to relax. The city limit of Ciudad del Sol was behind us, and it was time to prep Sally for what came next.

"You doing okay?" I asked her.

She nodded, her terror seeming to have melted into more of a daze. "Yes. I think so. Why, um... why didn't Daisy come?"

"She wanted to come," I assured her. "But it's best only one of us does the drive, you know?"

"Oh. Yeah, I guess."

Daisy, my family's fifteen-year-old ward, had definitely wanted to come. We'd even considered it for half a second because we knew a familiar face would be comforting to Sally. But we didn't need to risk two of us on the long drive to the handoff, and Daisy only had her learner's permit. Eventually it would be nice to share this part of the job with her. We would never be able to send Derrick or Dad anywhere solo with a traumatized omega girl because both were hulking Alpha men. Mom would take a turn occasionally, but she was the cog that kept our family store running, so sparing her for six hours of driving on any given day was difficult.

"And Daisy said to give you a hug for her and to tell you to email when you get set up at the center in New Mexico," I added.

A small smile graced Sally's face, the thought of the safety of the Southeast New Mexico Women's Assistance Center surely a comforting one. "Okay. And you'll let Mrs. Olsen know I made it out?"

"I absolutely will."

Justine Olsen had come to my parents fifteen years ago as a scared and newly awakened omega preteen. Her parents' pack had been poor, but they loved Justine and desperately wanted to help her avoid registration with USDPU. Justine, like many women of all designations, wanted the chance to live her life before settling down when she was ready. Unfortunately for omega females of all but the richest families, settling down would involve her being shoved at a pack of Alphas in the name of her "safety" and her duty to the country before she was eighteen.

My parents facilitated her access to black-market suppressants, and Justine lived unmolested as a beta until she was twenty-eight years old. She met a nice Alpha at her job teaching high school in Whitetail Hills and fell in love with him and his pack brothers. She stopped the suppressants, registered with the USDPU as a rare-but-not-unheard-of late-presenting omega, and promptly bonded with her pack.

If the USDPU was skeptical, they didn't dig further. Justine was already bonded and pregnant, doing her duty to make little Alpha boys and omega girls.

Justine had been the one to alert my mom to Sally's disappearance from high school after bonding with the Browns, and we'd agreed to check on her. Every few days for a month, Daisy had knocked on their front door, posing as a high-school classmate dropping off Sally's homework. After the first few visits, the Browns had allowed Daisy inside to talk to Sally for a few minutes, always under their watchful eye, but they'd forged a friendship anyway.

Inside the folders of "homework," we'd slip a note. Sally would write us back, and we quickly determined that we needed to get her out of there as soon as possible.

After all, there was no such thing as a legal divorce for an omega after bonding with her pack. We were her only hope for escape.

Sally gazed out the window as we drove, probably relaxing for the first time in months. The hills and ranch scrub of Central Texas would soon fade to the flat, dry terrain of West Texas. We would stop at the halfway point about three hours from the border and conduct the handoff.

“And you trust this person who’s meeting us to take me the rest of the way?” she asked.

“Yes. Completely. We’ve worked with this group for years. They’re not officially sanctioned by the New Mexico State government, but the governor looks the other way.”

New Mexico’s governor was a rare Alpha female, rarer still in top government positions. She had two pack sisters and was bonded to an equally rare male omega. She’d done her best to make New Mexico one of the few states that could operate as a safe haven for omegas—as much as that was possible under the oppressive laws of the federal government.

Sally nodded, mollified. She scratched absently at one of the bite marks visible at the base of her delicate neck—the bonding mark of one of her Alphas. “I’d *wanted* to bond with the Browns, if you can believe that,” she said absently. “I’m so stupid.”

“You are not. Not all packs are full of sadistic assholes, and I know they looked like a good bet on paper.”

“My parents were so thrilled,” she added. “A pack from *Whitetail Hills* wanted me. *Me*, the daughter of a pack of construction workers and a mom who can’t get through the day without an entire box of wine. They didn’t even care when I told them my Alphas were so... rough.”

I gripped the steering wheel tighter. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, Sally.”

I hadn’t missed the handprint-shaped bruise on her pale face in the brief moments the light had been on in the cab before I started the truck. We’d also gleaned from her notes to

Daisy that the Browns kept her locked in her room, only letting her out for meals. They used her for sex whenever they felt like it and without regard to whether she'd wanted it. When she'd tried to resist, they got physical.

Sally sighed, a small tear running down her face. "It's over now. I'll be okay."

"Yes, you will be. Marina will have your welcome packet—suppressants, new ID, and applications for your GED program. The center will also have staff counselors available to talk to you and medication for when the pain of the bond decaying really kicks in."

That last part didn't seem to bother her. "Good. I can't wait. Does it take long?"

"It's different for everyone. Most are through the worst in a month or two."

She eyed me in the darkness of the cabin. "Did you ever...?"

I shook my head. "Nope. I've been passing as a beta since I was thirteen. I'm twenty-one now, and it hasn't been completely hiccup-free, but I've never been caught and have definitely never bonded."

"Do you think you ever will? Like Mrs. Olsen?"

Fuck no.

"Probably not," I said instead. I never wanted to discourage our rescued girls from finding a better pack if that's what they decided they wanted when they were ready. The important thing was they had a *choice*. "And look at me," I went on with a wry chuckle. "Not exactly Alpha bait, am I?"

She gave me a droll look like I was the dumbest human on the planet, and it reminded me too much of Daisy. "You're, like, the *most* gorgeous, and you can kick serious butt. There'll be Alphas out there who are into that, no matter that you're stacked and, like, six feet tall."

"I'm five-eight."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

I laughed. *Teenagers, man.*

We settled into comfortable silence for the rest of the drive. Just before 2:00 a.m., I pulled my truck into the parking lot of a 24-hour diner in Fort Johnson, Texas that refused to pay the money to fix their broken security cameras.

Marina stood by her Jeep, coffee in hand. In her late forties, she was a kind but deadly beta woman who'd served in the military with my mother. Her wife and bonded Alpha, Tori, ran the Center.

I rolled my window down and waved. She grinned and meandered over to my truck. She'd pulled her braids back with a bright purple scarf, and she wore a thin white T-shirt tucked into flowy pants. Her scent was a faint chamomile that most omegas found soothing, a hint of it on the chilly breeze. Her rifle would be stashed somewhere in her backseat.

"Marina, for God's sake, put a jacket on," I teased.

She chuckled. "You Texans. It's fifty degrees—practically spring weather."

I gestured to Sally next to me, who peered curiously over at Marina. "This is Sally. She tells me she's in pretty good shape, all things considered—no broken bones or other major injuries. She's not due for another heat for a couple of months, so you guys should have plenty of time to get ahead of that if you start the suppressants immediately. No Alpha contact for a while, though. She did okay with Derrick, but we were in fight-or-flight mode."

Marina nodded. "Got it. Hi, Sally. I'm Marina, and I work for the Women's Assistance Center. We have a bedroom and a new phone with your *new* name on it. How does that sound?"

"Amazing," she replied in a quiet whisper. "Thank you so much."

Five minutes later, I watched as Marina's Jeep rolled quietly out of the parking lot, spiriting Sally away to her new life. They also transported a box of contraband we'd sourced for the girls at the Center. Relief hit me, quickly followed by exhaustion. Luckily, Marina had secured me my own cup of

diner coffee. I had a true crime podcast ready to go and an errand to run when I got back to the city, and then I would crawl into my bed and pass out until noon.



IT WAS STILL DARK when I crossed back into Ciudad del Sol, the February sunrise not due for another couple of hours. Still, the highway was brightly lit, billboards and streetlamps dotting the road at regular intervals.

As was always the case when I returned from a drop, I entered the City from the northwest, which took me right past Bluebonnet Palisades. The enormous gated neighborhood sprawled across the rolling hills of the City's northwest side, every house a palatial mansion owned by the wealthiest packs and the occasional super-rich beta family.

Just beyond the Palisades was an expansive and well-maintained green space, home to the Omega Finishing School serving all Central and South Texas.

Out of habit, I gave the Palisades my finger as I rolled by. We had no business there—the wealthy inhabitants would never venture down to Merchant Village where we had our store, and the omega girls born into packs with pedigree and money enough to live there would be unlikely to ever need our help. Their parents and pack name would buy their way into the OFS, where they'd be allowed to attend a college-like program while they were courted by the classiest Alpha packs.

And all without the interference of the government.

I exited the state highway and headed toward the city center. My route took me through Northwoods, a sprawling suburban enclave of modest single-family homes inhabited almost exclusively by beta couples and, if they were lucky, their single beta child.

I passed the local public university, its urban campus blending into the aging office buildings and architecture of the bustling mid-century neighborhood. Alphas and betas alike attended the school, and even the occasional lucky bonded

omega might enroll if her pack was forward-thinking enough to allow her to get an education.

Veering south toward downtown, I skirted around Whitetail Hills, nestled in the heart of the city and the scene of our little extraction earlier this evening. Quaint and idyllic, its historic homes, stately trees, manicured lawns, and expensive cars announced tasteful wealth and hid abusive packs from prying eyes.

A few minutes later, I was driving on the flyover that passed the heart of downtown. The corporate hub of citizens of all types, modern high-rises mixed with historic churches, hotels, courthouses, and libraries. One of the largest billboards in the city loomed next to the highway, interrupting what would otherwise be a lovely view of the downtown skyline on the drive by. It was a campaign ad for the mayoral candidate, Domingo Clara, depicting the middle-aged man in his finest navy suit, his excellent head of coiffed black hair, and his million-dollar smile bright as the LED light beaming against the billboard.

I flipped him off too. An Alpha from the social-climbing Clara Pack running on “traditional pack values” could go fuck himself.

I finally exited the highway just south of downtown and rolled onto the main drag of Merchant Village. My home since birth, it was an eclectic haven of mom-and-pop businesses, funky old housing, aging parks with more cement than grass, and no zoning laws.

St. James & Co., my family’s store, lay at the center of Merchant Village in a repurposed brick warehouse. My parents had converted the second floor into living quarters, and my fluffy bed in my perfect windowless room awaited me there.

But I had one last crucial stop to make, and I was fortunate my contact was an extreme night owl who usually didn’t stumble to bed until the sun came up.

I parked my truck on the curb in front of a modest condo complex tucked up next to the overpass. Climbing from the car, I zipped up my fleece vest, pulled my ball cap back over

my dark auburn hair, and tucked my braid under the collar of the vest. Satisfied I was casually unremarkable, I hurried up the outdoor stairwell to the second floor.

After a solid minute of me banging on the door of Unit 2D, my contact whipped open the door.

“Dylan, it is five-thirty in the fucking morning,” Federico grumbled. His blond ponytail was disheveled, and his Metallica T-shirt had seen many days since its last wash. I could only sort of detect his vaguely spearmint beta scent under the stronger smell of Fritos.

“Feddy,” I said with a shocking amount of patience given how tired I was, “I know you, and *you* know that I know you, and I know you weren’t asleep. You were either coding or streaming on Twitch. Don’t lie.”

“Fine, you caught me,” he huffed, relaxing against the door frame. His faux annoyance melted away, and he now looked at me with something like a genuine apology on his face.

Uh-oh.

“I know we’re due for a shipment,” he said, scratching his stubble. “But, um, my supplier has gone missing, and it’s going to take me, uh, a minute to coordinate a new one.”

“*What?*” I growled.

He held up his hands. “I know this puts you guys in a bind. You *personally* in a bind, maybe. But I’m working as fast as I can, and my tía is asking around. I’m headed to Mexico again in a month, so hopefully we’ll have something by then.”

“We are down to our *last* few doses,” I said, my heart beginning to race in my chest.

“Oh, well, good you’ll at least have some to get you through the next few months, then.”

No, I wouldn’t. I couldn’t do that to our girls.

“What’s left is earmarked, Feddy. And I just handed the surplus off to Marina for the Center!”

“Oh. Well, shit.”

I groaned and pounded my fist against the wall next to his head, and he jerked away in alarm. “Ugh. Shit. *Shit.*” I began to pace. “Okay, just... do not ignore my messages, and call me when you know *anything.*”

“I will, Dylan, I promise. I know the last time this happened was... unpleasant for you.”

“No fucking shit,” I snapped. I took a breath, prayed for serenity, then forced a smile. “Sorry, Fed. I know this isn’t your fault. Thank you for trying.”

He nodded. “I’ll message you when I know more.”

“Thanks.”

I bolted down the stairs, locked myself in my truck, and braced against the rising panic.

Federico was a dual citizen of the U.S. and Mexico, and he had family across the border that he visited every few months. Unlike the U.S., Mexico had never outlawed hormone suppressants, though they were often hard to come by because of the demand. Hormonal contraception was also widely available there without restrictions, while in the U.S. it could be next to impossible to get except in very limited circumstances.

We contracted with Feddy to keep a steady supply of both suppressants and birth control for any omega—anyone who could get pregnant, really—in need.

And I, Dylan St. James, was an omega in need.

Without the dose of suppressant I was due within the next forty-eight hours, I would become a ticking time bomb.

A lit fuse on the path to an explosion of potent pheromones and an unpredictable heat.

Not to mention the risk of being discovered and reported to USDPU.

I had a few weeks at the most before the mask would start to slip, and it was only a matter of time before a long-overdue

heat would fuck up my world.

And the last time that happened, people died.

DYLAN

It was almost 1:00 p.m. when I emerged from my room after doing more tossing and turning than sleeping. After throwing on a cropped sweatshirt and some jeans I found on my floor, I wandered into our living room and hissed like a vampire at the blazing winter sunlight that streamed through the tall windows.

I'd much rather have been hiding in my lovely pitch-black room, burrowed into my fluffy blankets and pillows while I pretended my personal autonomy wasn't about to be in serious jeopardy.

But a saint had left me a fresh pot of coffee and a breakfast taco in the kitchen—Mom, most likely—and I needed to get down to the store for a full debrief and to help out.

I poured a giant mug of coffee, unwrapped the foil from the taco, and shoved it in my mouth. I slid my cold feet into the fuzzy clogs I left by the front door. After shouldering my way out into the stairwell, I used my elbow to press the button on the keypad to lock up then stomped down the narrow metal staircase that led to our store below.

The sounds of a busy Saturday floated down the staff hallway. Along with a couple of storerooms, my parents kept their respective offices here, and both were empty at the moment. I scarfed my taco as I shuffled along with the enthusiasm of a zombie, then I made my way out onto the floor of St. James & Co.—the finest hardware and home goods store in Merchant Village.

I joined my mom behind the spacious cashier counter that sat along the store's back wall.

"Morning, honey," Mom said, hunched over the countertop and distracted by whatever she was looking at on her tablet, her wild copper hair falling around her face. She wore a long-sleeved St. James & Co. T-shirt and loose black pants, and her soft lavender beta scent smelled like family and soothed my nerves. "Feeling okay this morning?" she asked. "Marina texted earlier to tell me Sally's really adjusting well."

I pulled up a stool, set my mug on a coaster, and promptly collapsed face-first onto the counter with a frustrated groan.

"The heck is wrong with you?" Daisy called from her usual spot in a nearby camping hammock display that Derrick had hung from the metal rafters in the ceiling. She lazed like an empress on a palanquin even though she was on the clock, absently flicking a switchblade open and closed. "Did you fail to get a good night's sleeping in your *not-nest*?"

"My bed is not a nest," I grumbled for the thousandth time in response to her nickname for my room. "And no, I did not."

Daisy quirked a blonde brow at me, then snapped her knife closed with a flourish. "What is it, then?"

I squinted one eye in the direction of the floor to confirm none of the dozen or so customers were within earshot, then I muttered into the table, "Feddy's supplier is off the radar. We're not getting a restock for who knows how long."

"Shit," Daisy whispered.

"Language, Daisy," Mom said even though we all knew that was a losing battle. She put down her tablet and scooted next to me, placing a hand on my back and rubbing soothing circles. "Dylan, we can't panic yet. We have enough supply to get our girls who are due soon through the next dose, and you have *us* to take care of you if the worst happens. Just like we did last time."

Daisy's blade snapped open again with a violent click. "Damn right we will."

Our suppressant supply had run out once since I'd presented as an omega six months after my thirteenth birthday. I was nineteen, enjoying my post-high-school life of taking online college courses, working at the store, and training with Dad to become stronger and more ready to help our girls in need.

Within a few weeks of the missed dose, my years-overdue first heat hit me—a slow simmer of sweat and discomfort that finally exploded into a brain-numbing mess of pain and *need* that went on for days. My parents shut the store down and guarded the entrances while I writhed in agony in my not-nest—my confused body desperate for an Alpha's knot and a bonding bite to settle my out-of-control hormones.

My box of toys offered very little in the way of relief, and the backlash to the suppressants had been so powerful that a group of rogue Alpha males passing by in the night had broken into our store to investigate the whiff of enticing omega scent they'd caught on the breeze. Once inside, they were hit full-force with my pheromones in nuclear-meltdown mode and thrown straight into a rut.

They rampaged through the store and were quickly engaged in a violent fight with Derrick and my dad. Only one had made it alive to the stairs, where he met a bullet from Mom's rifle.

After my heat finally subsided, Derrick had fogged the entire store with de-scenter he'd dumped into a pest-control backpack. We called the police to report an armed robbery at the store, and we soon found out the attacking Alphas had a rap sheet a mile long. No one asked very many questions after that.

Daisy was thirteen at the time, only having come to live with us about two months prior. She'd sat stoically in front of my bedroom door for days, clutching her knife, ready to make a last stand against an intruding Alpha before I was knotted and bonded against my will.

We thanked the universe daily that Daisy was a beta descended from a long line of betas and had about zero chance

of ever presenting as anything but. She'd started hanging around our store when she was a malnourished twelve-year-old named Jeanie, and she always managed to leave with half of Mom's lunch or one of Derrick's protein bars. At one point I even snuck some old clothes I'd outgrown into her backpack.

The night she came to live with us, she showed up at closing time wearing a blood-spattered T-shirt and carrying a kitchen knife in her backpack. Her alcoholic father—a widower who drank away his pain—had attacked her, and she'd killed him.

Derrick and Dad rushed immediately to the rundown apartment on the edge of Merchant Village to stage it to look like a break-in and robbery gone wrong. While they were gone, Mom and I cleaned Daisy up and settled her in the spare bedroom. My parents soon applied to be her permanent guardians, and she changed her name to Daisy so that she could be a "D" name like Derrick and me.

She proved she had what it took to be a St. James during Heatmageddon and continued to do so from then on.

I sat up on my stool. What a fun trip down memory lane that'd been. "I know you guys have my back, and I love you for it. But last time was a nightmare I'd like to avoid for obvious reasons."

"We won't let it get that far, honey," Mom replied.

The bell over the front door clinked. Dad and Derrick swaggered in, their workout clothes putting their broad chests and carved muscles on display for the entire store.

Brandon St. James was a bear of a man who kept his dark brown hair in the same high-and-tight military cut he'd had for thirty years, though he used his time outside the military to finally grow the beard he'd always wanted. He was six-foot-five and radiated Alpha menace.

Derrick was an inch shorter and about twenty pounds of muscle leaner than Dad, but he was still a large and formidable Alpha. His identically dark hair was short on the sides and longer on top, a few strands now flopping over his sweaty

forehead. He and Dad both emitted a strong coffee-like scent, though Derrick's was tinged with caramel while Dad's was earthier, and they both smelled like home.

They'd been at the gym a few doors down, run by Derrick's friends—a group of mostly tolerable local Alphas. Mom, Daisy, and I would probably make our way down there tonight after closing to train.

“You look like shit,” Derrick said to me as he approached the counter, ignoring the thirsty stares of the group of beta women currently perusing our cookware section and doubly ignoring Daisy as she bared her teeth at them.

“Thanks, dick,” I replied, punching him in his big pec. Then I let him loop an arm around my shoulders and squeeze me in a hug before he pulled up a stool next to me.

Dad leaned over the counter to give Mom an inappropriate kiss, then he stepped back, crossed his brawny arms over his chest, and ran his assessing dark gaze across the lot of us. “Is something wrong?”

I updated them on the situation. Dad frowned but remained eerily calm. Derrick swore next to me, his fists clenching under the counter.

“We will deal with it,” Dad said after a minute. “I'll make a few calls to see if we can't come up with something to tide us over.”

“I vote we take a trip to the OFS,” Derrick added, looking over at me. “It would be better than nothing.”

Daisy snorted. “Please. I wanna check out the princesses in their castle, then flip them off before we steal from them.”

Dad's sigh was that of a long-suffering man. His children had yet to meet a challenge they didn't want to take on, and he was equal parts frustrated and proud. “Let's not risk that yet. But... I'll think about it. It's not a terrible idea.”

The Omega Finishing Schools enjoyed many special dispensations from the law that the rest of us chumps did not. Since they allowed the most highbred omega girls time to go to college while they were courted by fancy Alphas, the

schools encouraged the girls to put off their first heat until they could experience it after graduation in the loving arms of their chosen pack. Most omegas' first heat would hit sometime around the age of seventeen or eighteen, so the princesses were allowed a variant of suppressant that was only legal when dispensed by an OFS to its students.

Unlike the napalm-level suppressants I took, the OFS drugs worked only to delay the heats—they did not stamp out the omega biology that gave the girls their special, Alpha-enticing scents or their soft, feminine omega curves.

I supposed that if I could get my hands on some of those and ward off another nightmare heat, it would be better than nothing. I'd just have to hide away once my pheromones hung the "unbonded omega" sign on my front lawn.

I would not allow my parents to be arrested for failing to register me as a preteen, and I would die before I allowed myself to be forced into a bonding by the fucking state.

"I'm down," I said with a careless shrug. "I should be good for a few weeks, but if Feddy can't come through by then, we'll hit the OFS."

Dad reached out to squeeze my hand. "I'm sorry, honey. I'm so sorry that this is how things have had to be for you."

I squeezed back. "Not your fault, Dad."

He shook his head, still frowning, but relaxed a bit when Mom joined him on the other side of the counter, snuggling up to his side.

Dad did consider my situation to be his fault—at least, it was his genetics that had given me the one-in-a-hundred chance at drawing the omega short straw.

My parents met twenty-five years ago serving in the military together. Dad was part of a growing minority of Alphas who eschewed pack life, and he fell in love with my beta mother, Heather. He bonded her, married her, then knocked her up against the increasingly bleak odds of a successful beta pregnancy.

The government didn't exactly encourage Alpha males to mate with beta women, but they didn't forbid it, either, because that pairing still had a one-in-four chance of producing an Alpha baby. The rest were almost always your normal beta kids.

Except an Alpha like my dad, only one generation removed from a pack and whose mother was an omega, still had a less-than-one percent chance of producing an omega child with a beta woman.

My parents had really just blown the lid off the genetic lottery. Not only did my mom have a successful pregnancy, she had twins. They got their Alpha son, and they also got their rare beta-born omega daughter.

I didn't consider myself unlucky. I had a loving, supportive family, and that family was uniquely suited to help me retain my freedom and protect me in times of need—something most omega girls from all but the richest families did not have.

But on the rare day like today—after rescuing an abused omega who was a product of the system at work and then finding out my only tool for avoiding the same fate was in jeopardy—I let myself wallow in self-pity for a minute.

“Buck up, Dyl,” Derrick said, nudging me. “It'll be okay. If we have to kill a few assholes again, so be it. I could use the exercise—our extractions lately have been too easy.”

“Says you,” I huffed. “You're not the one who had to dance with Don the frat douche last night.”

“Lucky for him. He'd be dead otherwise. I saw Sally's face.”

“Her face isn't even on the top-ten list of terrible shit she's endured,” Daisy grumbled, still swinging in her hammock.

Dad dropped a kiss on Mom's head before moseying behind the counter to grab a package addressed to his business. “I'll be in my office if anyone needs me.”

While Mom was the head honcho in the store, Dad ran a security consulting business. If I had my way, Derrick and I would take it over someday.

A shopper caught Mom's attention by the grilling accessories, and she hurried over to assist. The bell over the front door jingled, and a familiar woman entered.

One of our special customers had arrived.

DYLAN

Ginger Crenwelge wandered into the store, wearing a tiny sweaterdress, tights, and fuzzy heeled boots. She paused by the candles to pretend to peruse them with great focus, and then she slowly made her way to the counter. Her decadent vanilla-frosting scent seeped into the space around us.

Derrick didn't move a muscle as she approached, though her scent wouldn't tempt him even if he *was* interested. She was solidly bonded to her pack of four Alphas, and her scent, mingled with theirs, reflected it. To Derrick, she would smell pretty dang good, but not like something he *needed* to fuck.

She batted her lashes at him anyway.

"Hi, I'm here for my special order," she said, all breathy and coy.

I could *hear* Daisy rolling her eyes.

"I'll grab that for you, Ginger," I replied, then added in a quiet whisper, "We have six months' worth set aside for you this time."

She dropped the flirty bullshit, relief flooding her face. "That's amazing. That'll cover at least the next two heats *and* final exams."

Ginger was here for her hormonal birth control pills—illegal except for those who could produce two doctors' opinions stating that pregnancy would endanger their lives. It

was a bit easier to procure than suppressants were, but we still counted on Federico for the most reliable supply.

For a pack of ruffians from the southern outskirts of the city, Ginger's Alphas treated her well. They had even "allowed" her to attend the community college downtown to get her degree, with the caveat that she'd withdraw if she became pregnant.

We were helping Ginger avoid that so she could become a nurse. There was such a shortage of nurses in the state that even omegas were hired without hesitation, no matter that they were supposed to stay in the home, birthing as many Alpha sons and omega breeders as possible.

I waggled my eyebrows at Derrick, who gave me a death stare in return, then I trotted off down the hall to Dad's office. I keyed the security code into the large safe mounted in the wall, swung open the door, and removed the false bottom to access our special inventory. I grabbed the blank white box marked with Ginger's name and dropped it in a St. James & Co. gift bag. Then I locked up and was off, shooting Dad a merry salute as I passed his desk.

Daisy had relocated to the counter, her long, skinny legs dangling over the side as she inserted herself into Ginger's private time with Derrick. Ginger's flirting wasn't serious and mostly out of old habit, but Derrick didn't enjoy even the loose insinuation that he would be interested in a pack's bonded omega.

And Daisy was only too happy to annoy the shit out of women who came sniffing around Derrick.

"Here you go, Ginger," I said brightly, reaching over the counter to shove her gift bag into her dainty arms. "Good luck on your finals."

"Oh, um," she replied, snapping out of her Derrick trance. "Right. Thank you so much."

She gave us a little finger wave before she turned to leave, hips swaying as she made her way to the front of the store and out the door.

Passing her on their way into the store were two dipshit assholes I was *not* excited to see. “Oh, for the *love*—” I groaned. “This day just keeps getting better and better.”

Daisy’s knife snapped open again, and I heard Derrick crack his knuckles behind me.

Two members of the Riley Pack swaggered into the store like they owned it. Jones Riley, the most dominant Alpha and leader of their pack, surveyed the nearby linens display with a wrinkled nose before glancing at his companion and jerking his head toward the back of the store where Derrick, Daisy, and I manned the counter.

Their dusty work boots left tracks on the polished cement floor, and Jones wore his tool belt over his paint-stained jeans. I didn’t remember the name of the pack brother who accompanied him—Tom? Tim? He was big but leaner than Jones and had shaggy, dirty-blond hair poking out from under a cowboy hat. The deep tan on his face and hands was that of someone who worked outdoors for a living.

Derrick and I were very familiar with fucking Jones Riley, a graduate of Village High only a year ahead of us before he moved down to South Ranch and promptly began to assemble a pack of struggling, working-class Alphas.

I’d heard he’d made himself a bit of a king down there after he’d come into a modest inheritance from his grandfather. The Rileys ran a small construction business, and they dropped by to sneer at our selection of tools on occasion when they were in the Village for lumber or whatever.

“Ah, looks like they left the kids in charge of the store today,” he said as he swaggered in front of the counter. His scent invaded my nostrils—his posturing cranking his Alpha pheromones into high gear—and I assumed a person receptive to his bullshit might think he smelled like a woodsy campfire.

To me, he just smelled like burnt toast.

When all three of us just stared at him blankly, his jaw tensed, and then his pale blue eyes zeroed in on me. He raked them down to my chest and then back up again. “Looking

good, Dylan. You reconsidered my offer to take a ride on an Alpha cock before you settle for some boring beta dipshit? I've found a really *driven* beta girl can even take part of my knot."

I rolled my eyes. An Alpha's knot wouldn't inflate for just anyone—only an omega or a true bonded partner—so Jones's random hookups were doing no such thing.

"Did you need help finding something in the store, Jones?" I asked blandly. "Because if you're cruising for pussy, you're in the wrong place. The Alpha-chasers tend to congregate down the street at The Blue Javelina."

We would not discuss how I knew that because it involved Derrick's sexual exploits. *I* was not hanging around the bar, hoping an Alpha would take me home.

Jones narrowed his eyes at me. "How about you tell me what the Crenwelges' omega was doing in here all by herself?"

"Buying a candle, numbnuts."

Tim-Tom growled at me. "Watch your tone, beta bitch."

Derrick was coiled like a spring next to me. That was what this little visit was really about.

It was the natural inclination of Alphas to swing their dicks around—posture at other Alphas, assert dominance, beat chests, and so on. Some, like Derrick and Dad, had more control over these urges than others, and some, like Jones, embraced them with open arms.

He was trying to goad Derrick into a fight.

"You watch *your* tone, Crocodile Dundee," Daisy retorted, still perched on the counter with her bare legs swinging, her knife lying casually at her side while she noisily sucked the dregs of her smoothie through the straw. "Dylan's in a bad mood today, and no one's gonna save you if she decides to take it out on your face."

Jones's head snapped in her direction, and then his stupid smirk turned lecherous. "I see you're still a mouthy little tart,

Lemon Muffin. When your tits finally come in, I'll teach you how to treat a *real* Alpha."

"*Fuck*," I groaned as Derrick was off his stool and over the counter in a fraction of a second.

Jones's face lit up as he squared up to Derrick, who'd placed his big body in between the Rileys and Daisy, blocking their view of her.

I leaned on my elbow, resting my chin on my hand, and watched, resigned as the heavy Alpha pheromones in the room ratcheted up to stifling. "Should I be offended?" I asked Daisy offhandedly.

"Nah," she replied, taking in the scene with wide, excited eyes. "He knows you don't need him to defend your honor. Someday, he'll figure that out about me too."

Derrick glared at Jones, menacing in his quiet, intense way. "Don't fucking talk about Daisy," he growled. "She's fifteen fucking years old. Don't look at her, and never comment on her fucking scent again unless you want your tongue cut out of your brainless fucking head."

Beta scents were weak, faded into the background and hardly noticeable to anyone who wasn't right up in their—*our*—personal space. Most betas had light, clean, unobtrusive scents, but Daisy's lemon had a sweetness to it that just *might* be enticing to an Alpha who was hardwired to seek out that decadent omega dessert.

The idea that she could become a target for the wrong sort of guy was a touchy subject for all of us.

"And stop propositioning my sister," Derrick added like an afterthought.

"My hero," I crooned.

Jones smiled, and Tim-Tom took up a supportive position at Jones's left flank. "What are you gonna do about it, St. James?" Jones drawled. "You're a packless nobody. You and your packless father think you're too good to act like proper fucking Alphas. Upsetting the natural order of things. Failing to teach your *girls* how to respect Alpha males." He stepped

closer to Derrick, who didn't move a muscle. "But how you gonna protect your little sisters without a *pack* behind you, buddy? Hmm?"

"Point of order—I'm technically five minutes older than him," I announced.

"Really?" Daisy stage-whispered. "Why didn't I know that? Were you guys a natural birth, or did they rip you from Heather's womb all dramatic-like?"

"The second one. And *all* births are natural births, Daisy."

Jones tried but failed to stifle a frustrated snort of breath. Derrick cracked a minuscule smile, but instead of taking the bait I'd attempted to give him to de-escalate, he stepped forward, now almost toe to toe with Jones.

"Are your feelings still hurt, Riley?" Derrick asked in a low voice. "Never heard the word *no* before until I turned you down? Is it hard for you to see my family succeeding while you and the feral assholes you convinced to follow you around are toiling away down south, drinking beer outside your trailers and trying to convince anyone who'll listen you've got the biggest dicks around?"

"Fuck you," he spat.

"Take a number, sweetheart."

I sighed, rubbing my aching temples as I pondered whether we shouldn't just shoo the two of them out back to finally have it out.

Jones had hated Derrick—and by extension, my dad—ever since he'd approached Derrick in our junior year of high school about forming a pack after graduation. Derrick had told him in no uncertain terms that packs were fucking poison and he'd rather eat roadkill than join one with Jones.

Dad had grown up the son of a pack of four Alpha fathers and an omega mother. He had two brothers—also Alphas, as the odds of multiple pregnancies producing babies that were only Alphas or omegas were near 100 percent in an Alpha pack-omega pairing. His family had been poor, and his fathers

worked in hard manual labor jobs during the day and drank excessively at night.

My grandmother was their house slave, sex doll, and breeder. Dad once said the house felt like a 24/7 toxic competition for “time” with her, and she was berated and punished when any one of her mates felt like he was being slighted. The Alphas had figured out which of their sons was their biological child, each father ignoring the other sons in favor of his own. The one Alpha without a biological son constantly took out his frustrations about that fact on the boys and on my grandmother.

My dad and his brothers, Brett and Benjamin, escaped into the military as quickly as they could. Once Benjamin, the youngest, was out of the house, my grandmother passed.

Her mates reported it as an accident, but my dad and uncles didn't believe it for a second.

They suspected she took her own life.

And they'd never get the proof or closure they desperately desired. Only one of my grandfathers was still alive, and my dad and his brothers cut off all contact years ago.

Dad had experienced pack life in its most malignant and dysfunctional form. He had no desire to risk becoming a part of that again, nor did his brothers.

Uncle Brett was married and bonded to a lovely beta woman named Kelly, and they lived in Colorado. Uncle Benjamin and his bonded mate and husband, Christopher, were currently touring the California coast in an RV, if his social media was to be believed.

Our work helping omega girls trapped in abusive packs had allowed Derrick and me to see the same evil with our own eyes. He and I carried that resistance to pack life down in our very bones, and Derrick had made it no secret how he felt.

It pissed off Alpha meatheads like Jones.

And it'd made Derrick *very* popular with the beta ladies. While Alphas choosing to forgo pack life were growing more numerous, it was still considered striking gold for the girls

chasing Alpha dick to happen upon one where there was actual serious relationship potential instead of just a night or a casual situation with an Alpha getting his rocks off before he and his pack found their perfect omega.

Derrick's prowess with pretty beta girls probably pissed off Alpha meatheads like Jones even more than his anti-pack stance did.

"Get the fuck out of my store, Riley," Derrick said like he was ordering a coffee rather than issuing a subtle threat of violence. "Or all the customers who are pretending not to be looking this way are gonna see me break both your fucking arms, and Dylan's gonna have your man on his belly, crying like a little baby."

Daisy huffed. "No fair. I want a job."

Jones tensed, ready to lunge, when I felt the imposing presence that was my dad appear from the staff hallway behind us.

The air was suddenly heavy with earthy coffee and promises of bloodshed.

"What's going on out here?"

For all his posturing, Jones deflated quickly, taking a small step backward and out of Derrick's face.

I glanced over my shoulder. Dad leaned casually against the back wall, still in his workout clothes. Mom had made her way back over as well, and she was hunched over the far side of the counter, one eye on us and the other on her tablet.

She'd stashed her rifle on the shelf underneath the counter where she stood, so she only needed to lean over and snatch it if she felt the need.

"Nothing, Dad," Derrick replied, calm as the eye of a hurricane. "The Rileys were just leaving."

"Indeed," Jones drawled. "I'd dropped in to check out the power tool selection, but I didn't see anything... up to the standards of Riley Construction."

With one last hateful look at Derrick, he turned and marched through the store and out the door, Tom-Tim trailing him like an eager puppy.

Derrick stepped back and relaxed against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched their retreat.

I leaned forward and whapped him on the back of the head. “Was that necessary?”

He shrugged a lazy shoulder. “He needs to learn.”

And I needed a drink.

AUSTIN

I took in the four Brown Pack Alphas as they sat scattered around on their living room furniture, still reeling from the shock of losing their bonded omega. Their emotional states ranged from murderous fury to near boredom.

“And you didn’t get a look at the kidnapper’s face?” I asked Don, the only one home last night when Sally had been taken. “Nor were you able to identify anything distinctive about their scent?”

He scowled at me from behind his puffy purple nose as he sat, rigid and defensive, on the worn leather couch. He seemed annoyed by our presence in their pack home, despite the fact that they were the ones who had hired us. “I told you,” he grumbled. “She wore a face covering and a baseball cap, and it was fucking dark outside. Whatever her scent was, it was masked by adrenaline and wasn’t strong enough to be anything but a beta’s.”

“I *still* cannot fucking believe you let a *chick* break your face and kidnap our omega,” his pack brother, Dennis, grouched. He was clearly hungover, slumped in an armchair looking like he’d rather be doing anything else. “And not even an Alpha chick. A fucking *beta*. Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Don snapped. The heavy scent of aggression filled the room as Don and Dennis eyed each other. “We were in a fucking fistfight, and if she was an Alpha, I’d have smelled the aggro from across the yard. It’s not like I could have known someone was going to scale the side of our house and steal

Sally from her room. At least I was here and *tried* to stop them instead of getting shitfaced downtown like the rest of you.”

“You would’ve been getting shitfaced downtown if it hadn’t been your night to stay in with her,” Dennis fired back.

“*Boys,*” their leader, Anton, barked with a blast of dominance that itched at my skin. “Shut the fuck up. The Bryce Pack is here to help us find Sally, and they can’t do that with you two fighting like fucking toddlers.”

It had been like this since Cam, Seth, and I had crawled over the cornhole boards, discarded frisbees, and empty Solo cups in the yard to knock on the Browns’ front door. We’d arrived about twenty minutes ago—three or so hours after they’d called Bryce Solutions in a panic earlier this morning. This was the first investigation that my pack had been cleared to run solo, so my patience for their bickering was thin.

I understood they were feeling all kinds of fucked up over having their new omega stolen out from under them, but I was here to get the facts, find Sally Brown, and close this case.

I needed them to focus.

My brother, Seth, glanced at me from where he leaned casually against the wall nearby. His messy chocolate-brown hair flopped over his forehead while the midday sun streamed through the large picture window and illuminated his tattooed skin and piercings like he was a painting. He’d shoved the sleeves of the fitted gray *Bryce Solutions* shirt we all wore to his elbows, so the Brown Pack was getting an eyeful of the intricate floral designs he had covering his forearms and hands.

“Hmm,” he drawled, looking pensive, as though a thought had just occurred to him, “Is there any chance that Sally ran away? Got homesick or something?”

Anton scoffed while the fourth Alpha, Chad, snorted a laugh like Seth had told a funny joke. “Not a chance,” Anton replied with a disdainful look in Seth’s direction.

Seth held his gaze with lazy amusement. Anton had discerned that I was both the leader of my pack and the most

dominant Alpha in the room, so he'd begrudgingly afforded me the appropriate deference. Unfortunately for Anton, Seth was also a powerhouse and would suffer no disrespect from him.

Anton must have finally realized he was not going to be able to intimidate my brother, because he huffed and slid his angry stare back to me. "We saved Sally from a fucking rundown shanty in South Ranch. She was thanking her lucky stars she was picked by a respectable pack from Whitetail Hills and not some feral assholes from the trailer park. There's no chance she ran away to go back there."

South Ranch was the sprawling rural area that sat just outside the city's southern border off Ranch Road 505. The ranchland was abundant and cheap, and most of its inhabitants lived at or near the poverty line. The Alpha packs down that way often congregated in huddles of trailer homes due to the lack of other housing available for large families.

If Sally was from South Ranch, she'd made a big jump up the social ladder when USDPU matched her with the Browns. They were a newer pack of recent college graduates, making them about the same age as we were, and each Alpha hailed from a well-established, respectable family. This gave them access to the money to spend on a historic home in one of the nicest areas of the city.

And the funds to pay the high price to engage Bryce Solutions to recover their omega.

The sound of the back door opening and slamming shut again cut off my next question. Cameron strolled into the living room, his blue eyes alight with curiosity.

"Well," he said as he came to a stop next to my chair, his usual charming smile on full display. He plopped his ass down on the armrest and tossed his flowing golden hair over his shoulder like a model at a photoshoot on the beach. I only just managed not to roll my eyes as he continued. "What I found in the backyard does confirm what Don has so graciously recalled for us." He batted his long lashes in Don's direction, and Don only scowled more. "The kidnappers scaled the side

of the house and accessed Sally's room via the planter box that was once mounted below her window but is now in two broken pieces in the yard below. There's evidence of Don's scuffle with the female assailant, and I found two sets of boot tracks in the dirt by the back gate—none of which could belong to Sally given their size.”

Anton sat up straighter on the couch. “You think there was a second kidnapper?”

Cam nodded. “It's likely. The second set of boot tracks are longer and deeper, so I think he was a large male. Possibly he carried Sally away while his partner engaged with Don—” He shot Don a placating look. “—who fought *valiantly* for his omega but unfortunately did not emerge victorious.”

Don bristled. “Fuck off. Like you could've done any better, beta prick.”

Cam just beamed at him like he'd called him the prettiest boy in the city. “We'll see when we catch them, won't we?” he replied merrily.

Anton shot Don a warning look before he was back to addressing me and only me. “Sorry, man. I suppose we weren't expecting the *Bryce* heirs to have a bonded beta in their pack.”

Seth chuckled. “But isn't he dreamy, though? I couldn't resist.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. It wasn't new for us to be questioned about Cam's presence in our pack, but it chafed at me all the same. An official pack was a group of three or more—usually Alpha males, but it wasn't unheard of for a beta to bond into a pack when there was mutual interest.

And there had been *mutual interest* between Seth and Cam ever since they were teenagers and Cam's rich-as-fuck beta parents moved into the mansion next door to our family home in the Palisades.

They'd made their relationship official two years ago when they were both nineteen, and Seth had bitten and bonded Cam

into our little pack last summer when they'd graduated early from college and moved back home.

I'd graduated a year ahead of them from the private university in Capital City where our fathers were alumni, and while I was waiting for them to come home to form our pack, I spent the year apprenticing under my dads and learning the ropes of Bryce Solutions.

Now I was the leader of my pack and on my first solo investigation at the age of twenty-three.

I didn't give a fuck that Cam was a beta. Seth loved him, and he was like a little brother to me. He didn't belong anywhere else except with us.

Cam winked in Seth's direction before patting me affectionately on the shoulder. "Shall we examine Sally's room?"

"Yes," I replied, looking to Anton for permission. "If you could show us the way?"

"Why?" Chad barked, the others tensing right along with him. "We don't want any other fucking guys in her nest."

Understandable even if the delivery was rude. "We get it," I replied gently. "We will do our best to leave her bed and nesting items completely undisturbed. But we'd like to just see if anything catches our eye—there's a chance Sally knew her kidnappers. They may have communicated with her recently."

They all exchanged loaded looks, then Anton replied, "That's unlikely, but okay, fine." He stood, ran his hands down his golf shirt and khaki pants, then gestured toward the entryway. "Follow me."

I stood from my chair, nudging Cam off the armrest, then followed Anton. Cam and Seth fell in behind me as we made for the stairs.

After passing four years' worth of fraternity portraits, college football pennants, and an actual mounted beer pong tournament trophy, we crested the stairs and made for a small bedroom at the end of the hallway.

“Here it is,” Anton said, gesturing to the dark room. “Try not to touch fucking everything in there.”

I stared at him.

“All right,” he conceded after a few seconds. “I’ll, uh, leave you to it.”

After he disappeared down the stairs, we padded quietly into Sally’s room. I flicked on the light before I closed the door behind us with a soft click.

Sally’s room was simple. Small—room for only her low four-poster bed, a dresser, and a little desk. Blackout curtains kept the space dark like omegas craved, and her bed was piled with blankets and pillows carefully arranged to create the nest that would’ve soothed and settled her omega instincts. While faded, her sugary strawberry scent lingered.

“Man,” Seth said on an exhale as he prowled around the room. “I know they just lost their omega, but those guys are douchebags.”

Cam chuckled. “My poor baby. Running up against some meatheads who don’t automatically bend the knee when presented with a Bryce Alpha.”

“You’re a Bryce now, too, my darling,” Seth shot back before he plopped into the dainty chair at Sally’s desk. His huge body looked ridiculous there.

I walked to the window, the ancient hardwood floor creaking under my boots. I ripped open the curtains. “Unlocked,” I announced after examining it. “No signs of forced entry. They tricked her into opening it voluntarily, I suppose.”

Omega traffickers, if that’s what this was, had all manner of underhanded tactics they used to secure their targets. Omegas were rare, precious, and so highly coveted that they could fetch an exorbitant price—and shady fucking packs that didn’t want to wait in the USDPU line would pony up.

“She was only seventeen,” Seth said as he flipped through what looked like school folders on her desk. “Just a kid. Probably impressionable.”

I shoved away the irksome feeling that gnawed at me with the mention of Sally's age. We weren't here to judge, but it was a stark reminder of how thankful I was my own sisters were able to put off bonding until they were well out of their teens. I looked at Seth. "I know our preliminary check on the USDPU matching process for this pack showed it was routine, but it still feels a little... off, doesn't it? I guess we're just not used to this shit. I've never been happier to be able to avoid the USDPU process."

Seth snorted a laugh. "Are you any more excited about our future choosing gala, brother? We haven't exactly been making an effort at OFS since we became official."

I scowled at him. "We'll cross that bridge when our parents force us onto it. At least the omegas we'll be choosing from will be... more mature."

Cam chuckled as he took a seat on the edge of Sally's desk to watch Seth sort through her schoolwork and journals. The tiny desk strained under his weight. Cam may have been a beta, but he was still six-feet-plus of carved, lean muscle and had the reflexes of a jungle cat. "You two are such whiners," he teased. "We can't be a bachelor pack forever—I want babies." He stuck out his lower lip in a dramatic pout that worked on Seth most of the time and on me only slightly less.

Seth smirked at him, reaching over to pat him on the thigh. "Plenty of time for that later, babe. We're focused on our *careers* right now."

"And our careers hinge on us finding this omega," I added. "Preferably before we have to call our dads in for backup."

"Man, if they swoop in for another high-profile omega rescue, they will be *insufferable*," Seth groaned.

Bryce Solutions was our main family business, owned and run by three of our four Alpha fathers. We provided private investigations, personal security, and mercenary work, including rescues and extractions.

Our dads had been the talk of the town last summer when they—with our help—had recovered the kidnapped omega

daughter of one of the wealthiest packs in the Palisades. She'd disappeared from the OFS on what she thought was a date with one of the Alphas in the pack she'd been courting, and instead he'd run off with her, lost to Alpha instincts on overdrive.

We'd caught up with them at the Texas-Oklahoma border. The six of us had quietly raided the motel he'd holed up in, disabled the Alpha before he could fire a single shot from the hunting rifle he'd wielded, and saved the princess from her feral suitor.

Somehow I didn't think that was what'd happened here at the Brown Pack house.

"Hey, I think I found something," Seth said suddenly, holding up a small piece of colorful paper. "It was taped up under the drawer, like she was hiding it."

He handed it to me. It was a purple sticky note, and it had the word *HELP* scrawled across it in big block letters. Beneath that was a local phone number.

I passed it to Cam. "Can you find out who that number belongs to?"

He was already on his smartphone, fiddling with whatever high-tech shit he had installed there from his parents' software company. He squinted at the screen. "It's a store down in Merchant Village." He quickly typed something else into the phone, his thumbs moving at warp speed. "It looks like one of those fancy hardware stores that also sells homey things. I like those—I can get a circular saw *and* some table linens all in one place."

"Why would Sally think that was a place to get help?" I mused.

"Why would Sally need help in the first place?" Seth countered.

We were quiet for a moment. None of us had an answer to that question. "We don't have any other clues," I said finally. "We'll check it out tomorrow to get a feel. If Sally thought she had to hide this phone number from her pack, it's possible

someone was grooming her. Establishing trust. Then it's much easier to snatch her.”

“Right,” Seth said, hopping to his feet. He plucked the note from Cam's fingers, folded it into a tiny square, tucked it in the pocket of his tactical pants, and gave me a pointed look. “I vote we keep the contents of this note to ourselves for now.”

“Fine,” I agreed. While we weren't here to investigate the Browns, I preferred not to invite lies into the conversation if they thought we were suspicious of them in any way. “Let's finish up our interview with them, see if we can contact Sally's parents, then regroup at HQ.”

We'd do what we were hired to do and get Sally back home safe. I only hoped we were in time to spare her from the irreparable harm that could be done to a defenseless omega girl.

And when we found the perpetrators, they'd discover the reason people came to Bryce Solutions instead of calling the police.

DYLAN

By Sunday morning, the sense of impending doom had abated a *teensy* bit. I'd slept some, and my energy was on the up and up.

Daisy and I opened the store at 11:00 a.m. like we did most Sundays to give Mom at least part of the day off. I was caffeinated, fed, and I'd even had time for a morning run with Derrick to clear my head.

I was a cool cucumber. It was not time to panic yet.

"You're like the dog drinking coffee in the fire from the 'This is Fine' meme," Daisy said, spinning idly on the stool next to me. She was watching me rap the "Cruel Summer" bridge as I fired up the register's computer.

"I'll panic when an Alpha walks through those doors and asks where we're making the mochas," I replied.

Because that was my *real* scent—coffee notes like Dad and Derrick, but slather on that rich omega chocolate.

"You're not funny," Daisy grumbled. "I can't even drink mochas anymore after Heatmageddon."

"Good. They'll stunt your growth."

"Okay, Mom."

A few customers began to trickle in, and I busied myself flipping through one of my mom's catalogs, circling things that caught my eye.

It was never too early to start planning for the Halloween displays. This was the year I convinced Dad to let us put a giant inflatable dragon on the roof.

The staff door behind us opened, and Derrick, dressed in gray sweatpants and nothing else, stuck his head out. “Hey, what do you guys want on your pizza? Mom’s about to order—”

The front door jingled. Derrick took one look at the person walking into the store, swore, then slammed the door and disappeared back down the hallway.

“Coward!” I called after him.

Haley Thomas strutted down the store’s open center aisle. She made a beeline toward the register, not even bothering to pretend to be here to look at napkins or something.

“Not it,” I said to Daisy. “It’s your turn to be on skank patrol.”

Daisy chuckled and cracked her knuckles. “Sure thing.”

She spun around on her stool, hopped to her feet, then disappeared into the staff hallway.

“Hiiiiii, Dylan,” Haley gushed as she arrived in front of the counter. The floral perfume she’d bathed in assaulted my nostrils, blasting her beta scent in stereo. “Ohmigosh, it’s been forever! We never see you at the Javelina. You should totally come out with us next weekend!”

Haley had graduated from Village High with Derrick and me, run off to college in North Texas, and now she was back, working downtown as a paralegal.

I also knew for a fact that Derrick had gone home with her from the bar last night, which had earned him a solid kidney punch from me on our run this morning.

“Hello, Haley,” I replied just as sweetly. “Can I help you find something? We just got a new shipment of quality stationary—perfect for a hip professional girl such as yourself.”

“Oh, um, that’s nice, but no,” she said. “I was actually just here to see Derrick. We had such a *great* time reconnecting last night—”

“Gross.”

“—but I forgot to give him my number! Is he upstairs? I’ll just be a minute—”

“*Dylan!*” Daisy shouted, reappearing from behind the staff door in the nick of time. “Can you come upstairs? Derrick took, like, the most *massive* shit, and he clogged the toilet and now it’s flooding! We need all hands on deck!”

I choked on my own saliva.

Haley’s face turned a hilarious shade of red, and she sputtered, “Oh, um, okay, well, maybe I’ll just come back later—”

“Yep, probably a good idea,” I said as I lurched dramatically to my feet. “Gotta go. Bye, Haley!”

I rushed to the door and followed Daisy into the hallway like my ass was on fire. We ducked into Mom’s empty office, and then we both exploded in a fit of giggles that our customers could probably hear all the way out in the store.

“Real fucking funny, you two,” Derrick grumbled. He was sitting in Mom’s office chair, his feet kicked up onto her messy desk. He’d found a T-shirt somewhere, and he wore his fuzzy man-slippers. “What if she goes and tells all her friends I take enormous, toilet-destroying dumps? I’ll never get laid again.”

“Oh, she’ll definitely do that,” I huffed between snorts of laughter. “But it’ll be so she can have you to herself. That was the look of a girl determined to catch herself an Alpha husband.”

“You should’ve... seen... her face,” Daisy wheezed, doubled over and clutching her stomach like she was in pain.

“Yeah, laugh it up, both of you,” he said. “Just because you, Dylan, haven’t gotten laid in a million years—”

“Hey—”

“And you, Daisy, are not *allowed* to get laid—”

Daisy’s humor dried up quickly, and her cheeks flushed. “Shut up, asshole. I’m not a child.”

“I’ll have you know it has not been a *million* years,” I announced before Daisy could pick a fight with him. “There was... that visiting Krav Maga instructor at the gym last fall. He was nice.”

And I’d had a nice beta boyfriend my last year of high school. We’d parted ways amicably after graduation, and he was in California, finishing his last year of college on a water polo scholarship.

As much shit as we gave Derrick, his nocturnal activities had nothing on his buddies who ran the gym we belonged to. Those guys were hot and had their shit together, and the ladies flocked to them like a swarm of horny locusts. The group of them would be well on their way to forming a pack, including the one beta, Ryan, if they weren’t so busy sowing their wild oats, nowhere near ready to settle down with a USDPU-issued omega.

“Whatever,” Derrick said, but I could tell he was softening up. He didn’t really want to pick a fight with me about my sexual activity—not just because I was his sister, but also because we all knew I had to be so damn careful with my body. “Thanks for handling Haley, I suppose.”

“Don’t thank me. Thank Daisy.”

He looked at Daisy, who was sitting in one of Mom’s extra chairs, pouting. “Thank you, Daisy, for devising a way to get Haley to leave without me having to be an asshole to her.”

“Sure,” Daisy mumbled. “You’re welcome, I guess. Maybe stop leading these poor girls on with your wandering dick.”

He gave her a stern glare, and Daisy took that as her cue to leave.

“I’m going back to work,” she declared and stomped out the door.

I watched her go, then I turned back to Derrick. “Well, this has been fun. I’ll leave you to your loafing.”

He waved a dismissive hand at me. “I’ll clock in after lunch.”

I saluted him, he flipped me off, and then I left to join Daisy at the register, hoping that the rest of my Sunday shift would be much less eventful than the first twenty minutes had been.



WHEN GRANDMA ANYA showed up at the store fifteen minutes later, radiating anxious tension, I knew my hopes were about to be dashed.

“Mary Rose is *missing*, Dylan,” she said in an urgent whisper. I’d met her at the far end of the counter while Daisy rung up a customer on the other end.

“Missing?” I hissed. “What do you mean, missing?”

Mary Rose was one of our girls. Daughter of a beta woman and the product of a one-night stand with a random Alpha, Mary Rose was like me—the rare omega born to a beta outside of a traditional pack. Lucky for her, her grandma knew to bring her to us, and fourteen-year-old Mary Rose had been on suppressants now for over a year.

“She didn’t come home last night when her shift at her after-school job ended,” Anya replied, her wrinkled hands worrying at the loose fabric of her maxi dress. “It’s not like her. She’s never not come home. She’s a good girl, and she knows the... risks.”

“Did she tell you where she was going last night?”

Anya shook her head. “No, and she doesn’t have a phone yet, so we have no way to contact her. But I do know she’s been hanging out with that smarmy little Riley boy. He’s handsome, and he’s trouble.”

“Jesse Riley?”

She pointed a bony finger at me. “That’s the one.”

Jones Riley's little brother. The kid was probably around seventeen. Not officially part of Jones's pack yet, but I'd bet he was itching to join after graduation.

I did not have a good feeling.

"We'll look into it, okay, Anya?" I patted her hand. "We can at least track down Jesse Riley and see if that gets us any more information."

She blew out a breath. "Thank you. I just didn't know who else to ask for help."

"If you find out anything else that might be helpful, send a message to Dad's secure line. You still have the number?"

"Yes, and I will," she replied. She reached out and wrapped one of my hands in her gnarled grip, squeezing. "I know what y'all are doing for our girls is dangerous, Dylan. Especially for you. Please be careful."

"Yes, ma'am."

As I watched her make her way back to the front, her shoulders hunched with the weight of her worry, Daisy finished ringing up the short line of customers and slid over to stand next to me.

"What was that about?"

I told her. She frowned, then pulled her phone from the back pocket of her jeans. "I'm not seeing Mary Rose in any pictures or videos posted on social media from last night," she said as she scrolled.

"Anya said she doesn't have a phone yet," I told her.

"Yeah, but we have a few mutual friends at her high school. They had their usual barn burner last night, but I'm not seeing any sign of Mary Rose."

I side-eyed her hard. "Since when do you have friends at South Ranch High?"

"I have lots of friends."

"Uh-huh."

“Jesse’s not in any of these posts either,” she added. “That’s probably more... unusual.”

“I’ll call a family meeting tonight,” I said. “We’ll get it all downloaded to Dad, then we can decide where we want to start—”

The door jingled again, announcing the arrival of some customers.

The instant they stepped into the store, the air shifted. It was heavy, pressing on my senses, almost as if I had to exert extra effort just to breathe.

“Damn,” Daisy murmured. “Those are some fine specimens.”

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry.

What the hell?

Three large men stood at the front of the store, each taking in their surroundings with a sharp, assessing stare. Two of them resembled each other—brothers, maybe? They had the same chocolate-brown hair, dark eyes, and olive-toned skin.

One brother was colorfully decorated with tattoos on his exposed forearms, hands, and on the sliver of skin peeking from under the collar of his shirt. He had small plugs in his ears, a thin silver hoop around one nostril, and his hair was artfully messy on top.

The other was more clean cut—stylish short hair, a hint of stubble, and he wore his T-shirt and black cargo pants like they were a thousand-dollar suit. He was polished but still somehow rugged, like a GQ GI Joe, and he exuded the authority of a pack leader.

Those two were definitely Alphas, judging by their towering height, muscles for days, chiseled jaws, and thick thighs that could power a girl into the stratosphere.

Nope. Snap out of it, Dylan.

I wasn’t sure about the designation of the third man—he was a few inches shorter than the others, a little leaner, and he had silky hair the color of sunshine that draped across his

shoulders. He was also so achingly beautiful that it hurt to look at him.

What is wrong with you, Dylan St. James?

“Too bad they look kind of... official,” Daisy added.

That they did. Matching gray shirts that hugged their defined chests. Tactical pants, standard-issue weapons strapped to their belts, and combat boots that made deceptively little noise on our cement floors as they began to move in our direction.

“Scatter, Daisy,” I whispered. “Better to give them only one target to interrogate.”

And better no one else sees me losing all sense over some hot Alpha men for the first time in my life.

She slipped away, ducked into the electrical aisle, and accosted an elderly customer with an energetic offer of assistance.

As the men approached the register, a terrifying thrill raced down my spine.

My pulse beat in my throat.

The beautiful blond paused by the Valentine’s Day display, and the two Alphas continued toward me. Their scents mingled, powerful and heady, as I breathed them in.

They were everywhere. I felt them wash over my entire body.

Rich, cinnamon Alpha *desserts* with woodsy undertones that announced virile masculinity in a way that dared you to argue.

Tattooed Boy smiled at me, his dark eyes alight with mischief.

GQ GI Joe crossed his big arms over his chest, and I noticed his eyes were a little lighter than his brother’s—there was some beautiful gold swirled into that rich brown. He studied me with curiosity that quickly deepened, reaching inside me, probing, caressing, searching.

My torched hormones revved and sputtered, flickering a warning at me like a dying neon sign.

Confusion, a brief moment of elation, and then body-racking terror.

I wasn't certain, but I had a guess.

And if I was right, I was in so much fucking trouble.

SETH

Well, now. What did we have here?

A stunning girl. Lightly tanned skin, big hazel eyes, dark and luscious auburn hair pulled into a loose ponytail. A smattering of adorable freckles on her nose and cheeks. Lean, defined arms on display in her purple T-shirt sporting the store's logo. A swath of toned stomach just visible above the hem of her jeans where she'd tied the T-shirt in a little knot.

Young, close to my age.

The right height and build to match Don's description of his female beta assailant.

Working in the store to which Sally's hidden phone number was listed.

Except either Don's sniffer was busted, or this wasn't our girl. He'd said she didn't smell like anything remarkable—even before she'd broken the absolute fuck out of his nose—but this was the tastiest beta lady I'd ever smelled in my life.

It wasn't powerful, but I was close enough to get a nice whiff.

An undertone of rich coffee, but there was a delicious sweetness lurking there that had me daydreaming about bathing in silky chocolate ganache.

“Hi there,” I said, unable to stop myself from deploying the most panty-melting smile in my arsenal. “I'm Seth, and this is my big brother, Austin.”

I watched her take us both in with guarded suspicion—but was that a little *want* I saw flash in those beautiful eyes?

Yay.

I motioned to where Cam stood nearby, chatting animatedly to an old lady wearing a Texas-flag-patterned moo-moo. “And over there is Cameron. We’re from Bryce Solutions, and we’re investigating the disappearance of a young woman. Do you mind if we ask you a few questions?”

“Sure,” she replied with a coy smile. “If you guys are going to buy a few things, that is. I’m happy to assist my *customers*.”

“Cute,” Austin said, stepping forward and placing his hands on the counter. He leaned in just a touch, and our girl didn’t balk even a little bit. “Does that mean we have to purchase your cooperation with an active investigation?”

He kept it in control, but I caught the moment he got a good sniff of her. He tensed ever so slightly, and his Adam’s apple bobbed with the rough swallow he tried to smother but couldn’t.

She smirked. “It means you have to purchase something to be able to continue to take up space at my counter, yes. You guys are private, not the cops, so you have to play by my rules in my store.”

I nudged Austin. “I like her.”

Cam prowled over, his blue eyes dancing. “Hello, beautiful,” he purred to the girl, reaching out to clasp her hand in his. She offered him her hand without fuss, those pretty eyes taking in Cam’s face in an unabashedly greedy way that I understood completely. “My name’s Cameron Lowell-Bryce,” he went on. “What’s yours?”

“Dylan St. James,” she replied.

Loved that name.

“Oh, *the* St. James of St. James & Co.?” Cam gushed. “I have to tell you, I love this place. I have my eye on that awesome hammock for our condo. We should come shopping

here again now that we've moved downtown, don't you think, boys?"

"Cam, focus," Austin said without any bite.

"I am focused. On Dylan. She's so lovely."

A little hint of pink hit Dylan's cheeks, delighting me to no end, before she put her business face back on. "Thank you, Cam. You are also entirely too lovely. Please tell your... friends...?"

"Pack," he corrected with a sexy wink. He hooked one long finger under his shirt collar, then he pulled it aside to show off the shiny bonding scar that decorated the fleshy part of his shoulder where it met his sinewy neck. "Seth gave me this. He's the best."

She eyed my bite mark with interest before she darted a glance at me. I grinned at her, and she swallowed, shaking her head like she was clearing it.

Yes, sweetheart. We fuck, and it's as hot as you think it is.

"Please tell your *pack*," she said to Cam, "that if they want to crowd my counter, they'll need to purchase something."

He snickered, looking over at Austin and me. "I love it. You keep those two in line for me, feisty girl. I will gladly go shopping while y'all... chat."

He wandered away, appearing aimless, but I knew he was cataloging everything about the store in meticulous detail. His little interlude up here with Dylan was intended to bring her guard down a bit—Cam could honeypot a nun—but I caught the legitimate sparkle of interest in his eyes, and I felt the same hum down our bond.

Cameron had a little crush.

"So, Dylan," I said, bringing us back to the task at hand, "now that Cameron is on a shopping spree, may we ask you a few questions?"

"I suppose so." She sighed, then she looked at Austin. "Hit me, GQ GI Joe."

He frowned at her while I burst out laughing. “Love that. What’s mine?”

She shrugged. “Tattooed Boy. Unoriginal, sorry.”

“Cam?”

“The most heartbreakingly beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I said wistfully.

Austin blew out a breath, but he was fighting a smile. “You’re going to give Seth and me a complex, Miss St. James.”

“I just hope you’re both sufficiently humbled walking around with a bonded beta that looks like him. Alpha men need an ego check every now and then.”

Damn it, this girl could not be an omega kidnapper.

I really didn’t want her to be, anyway.

Austin pulled his phone from his pocket and slid it in front of Dylan. A picture of Sally was on the screen. “Have you ever seen this girl?”

She pondered it. “Can’t say that I have.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep.”

He pressed on. “Has anyone named Sally ever called the store, seeking help? Or any female at all?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “No. Why do you ask that?”

“Sally is a bonded omega who was taken from her pack home Friday night. She had the phone number to your store hidden on a note that indicated it was a place to call for help.”

Dylan’s face was stone. “That makes no sense to me. I don’t know anything about it, and I’m sorry to hear about Sally.” She leaned forward, beckoning us closer. We practically elbowed each other out of the way to get to her. “Are you guys *certain* that this omega didn’t run away voluntarily? Not every pack home is a happy one, you know.”

“We’re investigating all possibilities,” I replied in a low whisper. “We just want to find her and make sure she’s safe.”

“You’re being *paid* to bring her back to her pack,” Dylan replied. “That’s not exactly the same thing.”

Austin studied her intently. I could feel his brain whirling at a hundred miles an hour. “We’re not the bad guys, Dylan,” he said softly.

“I hope you’re right,” she replied, her voice just as soft.

The door behind the counter marked “Staff Only” banged open, snapping us out of the reverie of our little huddle. A big Alpha dude came stalking out, his familiar hazel eyes tinged with aggression. His coffee scent was bitter, and his pheromones pulsed with enough dominance that Austin and I both took a step away from the counter and readied ourselves for a fight.

“Step away from my sister,” he growled as he came to a stop in front of us, blocking us from Dylan.

“Derrick, chill,” Dylan said with an exasperated huff. “Say hi to Austin and Seth.”

“This is your *brother*?” Austin asked as he sized Derrick up. “Interesting.”

It was *very* interesting. Now we had a possible suspect for our second set of boot prints.

“Are you guys twins?” I asked excitedly. Siblings were so damn rare outside of packs.

Derrick ignored my question. “You guys wanna explain why I walked out here to find two strange Alpha males in my sister’s face while she’s trying to work?”

“She was handling it, you overbearing ass!” a voice called out from nearby.

I glanced to the right of the register. A teenage girl lounged in a display hammock a few feet away, wearing the same purple St. James & Co. shirt as Dylan, marking her as an employee. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and bright

green eyes, and she was munching on what looked like a Twizzler.

Next to her in a beach lounge was Cam, also chewing on a Twizzler. He grinned, eating up the Alpha drama unfolding in the room like he was at the movies.

“Who the fuck is that with Daisy?” Derrick asked in a low and threatening voice.

“That is Cameron, my bonded beta,” I replied with a dangerous smile. “Watch your tone, man.”

“Oh my God,” Daisy groaned. “Cam and I were just talking about *hair products*. Dial it all the way down, Derrick. People are leaving because you guys are choking us the hell out with your Alpha bullshit.”

I pointed at Daisy. “I like her too.”

“*She* is not your business,” Derrick snapped.

“*Derrick*,” Dylan hissed. “Calm the fuck down. These men are from a private investigation firm, and they just had some questions about a *missing omega* they’ve been hired to find.”

Derrick cooled. He leaned back against the register counter and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked between Austin and me, scrutinizing us more closely than he had when he stormed out here like the Alpha hothead we all were underneath our civilized veneers. I watched as he cataloged our matching shirts, gun belts, tactical pants, and work boots.

Then our faces—young, around the same age as Dylan and him.

He smiled, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d have said he was taunting us. “And what makes the professionals at *Bryce Solutions* think a hardware and home goods store is the place to look for a missing omega?”

“We have our reasons,” Austin replied.

“And do you have any more questions? Or did Dylan answer them all?”

It was Austin's turn to smile. "I think we're good here. We'll be in touch."

He pulled a card from his pocket and held it out to Derrick. They engaged in a stare off that had even me shifting uncomfortably in my boots—Austin's dominance level was off the charts, but so was Derrick's. Then Derrick finally plucked the card from Austin's fingers and stashed it in his own pocket.

I took advantage of the two of them being distracted by their dick-measuring contest to saunter over to the counter again to say goodbye to our girl. I grinned as I passed her my own card, leaning in again as I whispered, "Dylan."

I felt her tense a bit at my nearness, but her smile was real and beautiful. "Seth."

"You'll call me if something comes up that we need to know?"

"I will call you if something comes up that you need to know, yes."

"Do we have different definitions of 'need to know'?"

"Maybe."

This girl.

Austin butted into our space. He held out a hand for Dylan, and she placed her smaller hand in his. "Nice to meet you, Dylan," he rumbled softly as he gave her the gentlest squeeze. "I'll be seeing you, I think."

She blinked at him, and I bit back a pleased chuckle. My brother was smooth when he wanted to be.

"Maybe," she said again.

"You two," Derrick growled at us. "Disperse."

We shot him identical dirty looks, which he returned with the world's flattest stare.

"Cam!" Austin called. "Let's go—*Cameron!*"

Cam was still lounging with Daisy by the hammock, the two of them cackling together about something. He looked our way, stuck out his lush lip in a pout, then reluctantly got to his feet. He leaned down to pop a chaste kiss on Daisy's cheek, and she waved happily to him as he left her to slink over to us.

"Miss Dylan," he crooned as he approached the counter. He leaned on his elbow, propping his chin in his hand as he stared adoringly at her. "I very much enjoyed my time with Daisy, and I've ordered a hammock like hers in green. I'm sorry we didn't get to chat more, though. Can I see you again?"

Okay, Cameron, just go right for it.

"Maybe," she said once more, her cheeks flushed. "Though I'm sure you guys will be very busy with your investigation. I hope you find... what you're looking for."

"Me, too, gorgeous," he replied with a big beaming smile.

My dick stirred in my pants as I looked at the two of them together, and *wow* was it really not the time.

"Let's go," Austin barked in a low whisper, jerking his head toward the door.

With one last longing look at Dylan, I waved at her, and then my mate and I followed my brother out the door.

CAM

“I want her,” I announced as we took our seats at the taqueria down the street from St. James & Co. “Please, Sethy? We haven’t had a girl in *forever*.”

Austin rolled his eyes. “She is our prime suspect. You can’t fuck her.”

Seth pointed a tattooed finger at him. “Then you can’t fuck her, either. Don’t act like you don’t want to.”

Austin pinched his brow. “This is a mess. We follow Sally’s mystery phone number to the store and find a female beta matching the vague description we have of Don Brown’s assailant—”

“Except she smells like fucking heaven,” Seth pointed out.

She sure did. No one smelled as good to me as Seth—and by proxy, Austin, in a non-lust-inducing way—but Dylan’s scent, while muted, was mouthwatering. Espresso, cream, decadent chocolate all threaded in a tantalizingly light beta bouquet.

And to top it off, she was a lithe and sexy redhead who wasn’t afraid to sass an Alpha.

Want.

“—except that, yes,” Austin continued. “And *then* we find out she has an Alpha brother, a perfect fit for our second suspect—”

“But they are both entirely lacking in evil kidnapper vibes,” I finished for him. “I plan to run a full background on the entire St. James fam, but I got the gist from Daisy. These are not people who exploit vulnerable girls.”

Austin leaned back in his chair, the cracked turquoise vinyl crunching under his huge frame. He took a sip from the beer our waitress had just set in front of him. “What did you learn from Daisy? And who is Daisy, by the way? She doesn’t look like another sibling—which would have been a miracle in itself.”

Daisy was one of my new favorite people, and I was excited to talk about her. “Daisy is fifteen years old, and she’s the ward of the St. James family. She used to live in a rundown apartment complex nearby with an abusive, alcoholic father. One night when she was thirteen, he got blackout drunk and came after her with a crowbar. She killed the asshole with a kitchen knife, and then she went to the St. James family. They cleaned up the scene and became her guardians.”

They both stared at me. “Wow,” Seth said after a moment.

“She also mentioned that Brandon and Heather St. James are decorated veterans,” I added. “I’ll confirm that, obviously, but something isn’t adding up here, guys.”

“You think we’re on the wrong track?” Austin asked.

“No, I think we’re on the right track,” I replied. “Dylan and Derrick’s parents being ex-military only makes them *more* likely to be our suspects because it means they have the resources and the knowledge to plan an extraction and fight an Alpha in hand-to-hand combat. But I think... I think we may be chasing the wrong bad guys.”

“We’re doing the job we were hired to do,” Austin said. He looked at Seth. “But Dylan insinuated exactly the same thing, didn’t she?”

Seth nodded. “She knows something. I want to know what it is.”

“As long as the road leads to Sally, that’s the road we’ll take,” Austin said.

I grinned. “Then we’re staying on the Dylan beat. I’m thrilled.”

Seth squeezed my thigh affectionately under the table. It had been quite a while since we’d gotten excited over the same girl, though it was unfortunate this one came with some... complications.

Not that our pack didn’t have its own complications.

No matter. We’d figure it out.

On cue, Austin’s phone rang. On the screen was the stoic, handsome face of Andrew Bryce, CEO of Bryce Solutions and one of Austin and Seth’s four fathers.

Austin sighed irritably. He loved his dad—we all did—but he tended to hover. He propped the phone up against the table’s napkin holder. “Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, boys, how’s it going?” Andrew sat at his desk in his home office, dressed in his Sunday casual—a charcoal cashmere sweater that matched his dark-framed glasses. “Any movement on your case?”

“We just took this case yesterday, Dad,” Seth replied. “But yes, we do have a lead.”

“And we don’t need a babysitter,” Austin added.

Andrew raised his hands in surrender. “I know that. But as CEO, it’s company procedure for me to check in on all my active investigations. Or would you rather I send Rodrigo down there?”

“Absolutely not,” Austin said quickly. Rodrigo was another one of his fathers, ex-Army and head of all security at Bryce Solutions, and nosy as all get out. “And we don’t have anything to report yet, anyway. We’ll let you know when we have something concrete.”

“Great.” Andrew shifted back in his chair, and the professional demeanor slipped away as he eyed the three of us through the screen. “Now, as your father and not your boss, I’m politely requesting you three call your mother sooner rather than later. Since Seraphina left for the OFS and you

three moved out officially, the empty nest has hit her hard. And she has much to discuss with you regarding your choosing gala.”

All three of us stifled a collective groan.

“She especially misses you, Cameron,” he added. “Camille has been fretting about your parents being abroad for so long. Apparently you need extra mothering.”

I appreciated how easily the elder Bryce Pack had adopted me right into the family, referring to me as their child as easily as they did Seth and Austin. My parents were wonderful and loved me to the moon and back, but they’d treated their own empty nest as an excuse to retire early and travel the world—something I fully supported.

“Please tell Camille to set a place for me at the next Sunday tea,” I replied. It was time for me to catch up on the gossip of the housewives of Bluebonnet Palisades, anyway.

“Dad, I know Mom is feeling... enthusiastic about the choosing gala,” Seth said, sounding tired. “But what is the rush? You know we haven’t really expressed interest in bonding an omega yet.”

“Seth, I really do not understand it,” Andrew replied, removing his glasses to pinch his brow in frustration. “We are so fortunate to have the *substantial* funds it takes to put your pack on the courting roster at the OFS, and most packs are breaking down the doors to find their omega. She’ll balance out your pack, settle your instincts, give you children, and... *satisfy* you in a way I’m not sure you’re really comprehending, given your resistance.”

I smirked as Austin and Seth both wrinkled their noses at the thought of their sweet, demure omega mother taking *all* the knots of her four bonded Alphas.

“And I meant no offense to you in your relationship with Seth, Cameron,” Andrew added. “You know I value my relationship with Jonathan as much as mine with Camille.”

I nodded happily. “None taken, sir.”

Andrew and Jonathan's relationship predated their pack, like mine and Seth's. Jonathan Bryce was a pediatric surgeon at the private hospital on the city's west side and pretty much my hero.

"Anyway, we'd prefer to not pay your OFS dues into perpetuity, made of money as you seem to think we are," he continued. "Just... be open. You've barely spent any time at the OFS events since you officially formed your pack. How will you know if you don't try to meet the girls?"

"We went to the holiday ball after all five of you made a giant fuss," Austin pointed out.

And it had been interesting but wholly uninspiring. The girls were pretty, smelled nice, and were by all accounts extremely motivated to match with a pack of hot, moneyed Alpha men who would knot their brains out when they finally let their bodies have what they craved.

There just hadn't been any... spark.

Not for my Alphas, even though they were hardwired to find an omega to rut into oblivion. Not for me, even though I liked to tease them about how much more the omega ladies loved me than them.

It was hard to spark my Alphas these days, but a bold and gorgeous beta lady who may or may not be an omega-napper had certainly lit them both up this morning.

Andrew huffed. "Well, try again at one of the *numerous* functions they'll have this semester. And, on that note, one last thing." He paused, and I felt the annoyance prick at my skin before he'd even had a chance to say it. "The VanHolts are coming to dinner next week, and we'd appreciate it if you'd all make an appearance at that."

"Dad, for the love—" Seth griped. "Why are we still on this?"

"Because," he snapped, "the VanHolts have been friends of ours for a decade, so the least we can do is encourage you three to *get to know* their son. He's very interested in your

pack, and you can't act like an additional Alpha would hurt your prospects at the OFS."

"He just wants to *get to know* Cam," Seth fired back.

"And why is that a problem?"

I reached over to stroke Seth's hand. "It's okay, my love. Who can blame him?"

We'd encountered Lonnie VanHolt at various social functions over the years. He was the most boring milquetoast of an Alpha to ever step off a yacht in the Bahamas, and he definitely wanted to fuck me.

But he also wanted a shot at a pedigreed OFS girl, and he needed to join a pack with the right ties. His older brother was already packed up and bonded, and, for whatever reason, Lonnie hadn't been invited.

"Look, Dad," Austin said, his voice weary. "If we can make dinner with the VanHolt, we will, but our investigation takes all priority. And we've already told you that none of us feel that Lonnie is the right fit for this pack."

Andrew sighed. "Fine, but I do appreciate you at least making the effort for... appearances. The VanHolt is the major donor for Jonathan's current research, so...."

"We get it," Seth replied. "We'll do it for the babies."

"Thank you." He signed off.

Austin snatched the phone and shoved it in his pocket with an irritated sigh.

"They can't make us bond with anyone, brother," Seth said. "Even if we *choose* someone at this gala, we're only choosing to court them. No bites, no bonds."

"I just want to do my fucking job and take care of *my* pack without interference," he grumbled.

"You're doing amazing, sweetie," I cooed at him.

He snorted a laugh. "Thanks, Cam. Let's eat and get back to your new favorite topic, yeah?"

I gave him my happiest smile. “If you’re referring to Dylan, then yes, let’s.”



THREE DAYS LATER, we found ourselves tailing Dylan’s truck as she and Daisy drove south out of the city.

It was approaching midnight, and we had not a damn clue what they were up to, but we suspected something... interesting.

I hoped so, anyway. The last few days had been uneventful, and we’d made no progress in our investigation.

We’d decided to divide and conquer. One of us took a shift watching the St. James & Co. store while the others hunted additional leads to Sally’s whereabouts from headquarters.

My full review of the St. James family had confirmed everything Daisy had told me. Brandon and Heather St. James had served two tours of duty in the Army before retiring to open their store. Brandon ran a security consulting firm, and he had nothing but satisfied customer reviews. He and Heather became Daisy’s legal guardians after her father had been killed in a “burglary gone wrong.”

That had been impressive work by Brandon and Derrick—I’d looked at those crime scene photos, and the burglary story checked out completely.

Dylan and Derrick were twenty-one years old, graduates of Village High, and most recently the recipients of business degrees from the state’s largest public university via online courses.

Nothing odd or suspicious had occurred in or around the store in the three days we’d been observing it. We’d noted two instances in which an omega woman entered the store alone, but they’d both emerged decidedly un-kidnapped.

Yesterday, I finally got in touch with Sally’s parents, and they had no information on her whereabouts. They’d also stated emphatically that Sally was *blessed* to have been chosen by the Brown Pack and was surely missing them terribly.

Seth also interviewed several of the Browns' neighbors, and all of them seemed to think the pack were "a little rowdy sometimes" but "nice young men from good families." No one had seen anything untoward that night or any other.

Austin spoke to the principal at Whitetail Hills High where Sally had transferred after bonding with the Browns. She was a good student, but he did mention that she hadn't been to school for almost two months before her disappearance.

We didn't know what to make of any of it, and we had nothing to tell our *clients* when they called daily to ask if we'd found Sally yet.

But tonight, luck was on our side. Austin had been on the St. James stakeout while Seth and I mingled with the locals down at The Blue Javelina. We met a few of Derrick and Dylan's ex-high school classmates, and they didn't have much information to offer us other than that the St. James family worked hard and kept to themselves.

We also determined that Derrick was in high demand with the beta ladies as a known anti-pack Alpha—not totally surprising, since his father had chosen the same path.

Seth and I had to inform a few disappointed girls that no, we were not really what one would call *friends* with Derrick St. James and could not introduce them to him. We'd also had to turn down more than a few generous offers for companionship ourselves.

We'd been about to call it a night and head back home when Austin called. Dylan was on the move, and he was coming to pick us up. After piling into our company-issued armored SUV, we were off on an adventure.

"Where could they possibly be going?" Austin asked after we'd driven about ten miles. "It's midnight in the middle of the damn week."

"Somehow I doubt they're going to a party," Seth said. "That girl doesn't do much but work and go to the gym where those big Alpha assholes who run the place pretend not to be checking her out behind her brother's back."

“And Daisy has school tomorrow,” I added. “So, I assume whatever it is couldn’t wait.”

Up ahead, Dylan’s little silver truck turned off the highway and onto a country road. Austin slowed down and cut the headlights, following her over a cattle guard and into a sprawling rural neighborhood.

“Guess we’re headed into South Ranch,” Austin mused.

We wound along the road, passing large lots separated by wire fences, most containing nothing but cedar trees and tall native grass as far back as we could see in the pitch black. After ten minutes or so, Dylan finally cut her own headlights and turned onto a dirt driveway.

We crept along behind her, driving at least another half mile before Dylan finally coasted to a stop and pulled off the road to park under some trees. Austin killed the engine and drifted into the grass a good distance behind her.

About fifty yards in front of us, we could just make out a group of manufactured homes—three of them set in a semicircle around a front yard of sorts illuminated by the porch lights on each trailer.

Dylan exited the truck, looking like a sexy cat burglar. It was chilly tonight, and she wore a black fleece vest over a dark thermal shirt and a black baseball cap. Her dark tactical pants and boots completed the outfit along with what definitely looked like a 9mm strapped to her belt.

“She looks like a pro,” Austin murmured, watching her closely.

Daisy popped out of the passenger seat. She had on leggings, fuzzy boots, and a purple sweatshirt. There was a knife strapped to her thigh, and she wore a beanie that made her look like she had cat ears.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Seth whispered, “but where the fuck is Derrick?”

“I suspect our girl can take care of herself,” I replied, though I didn’t love the mix of anxious worry and guarded suspicion that was sloshing through my stomach at the

moment. “Though I’d prefer if we just... followed along. For Daisy’s sake, especially.”

We watched as the girls melted into the shadows, likely headed toward the trailer homes up ahead.

Austin gave them a sixty-second head start. “Okay, we’re on. Keep back, observe, and we don’t interfere unless someone is in imminent danger. Let’s hope we’re not about to witness two upstanding young women kidnap an omega against her will.”

“Or do something that gets them hurt,” I added.

“Or that.”

We exited the car, synchronized and silent, then dissolved into the darkness behind our girl.

DYLAN

“Do you think your mates are under the impression we don’t know they’re following us?”

I gripped the steering wheel tighter as I turned on the dirt driveway that led to the Riley Pack compound. “Stop calling them that, Daisy.”

She tutted. “Denial won’t make it go away, Dylan. At least Cam is awesome. I wouldn’t mind if he was around more. Jury’s still out on the other two.”

There had been no sense in lying to my family about my suspicions. Daisy had seen me struck dumb by Alpha mojo for the first time ever, and Derrick had come in hot to break it up when he’d felt my unease because he was my twin and we had that weird sixth sense about each other.

The Bryce Pack were, in all likelihood, my scent-matched mates.

A true scent match came along once in a blue moon between an omega and their pack—if they were lucky enough to find one another. The local USDPU office managed to facilitate a scent match once every three or four years, and you’d better believe they did a gushing press release every time, plastering pictures of the happy pack all over their website.

I imagined the OFS system had its fair share of scent matches over the years, too, but they didn’t feel the need to inform the rest of us.

Scent compatibility was always a factor when matching an omega with their pack—one didn't want to spend their life bonded to someone whose scent they hated—but that would be just one consideration among many others.

But a true match? No one would *ever* smell as good. This was our biology telling us this was our perfect mate or mates, and together we would create a harmoniously balanced, happy pack forever and always.

And I knew deep down that there wasn't a chance in hell anyone could possibly smell as good to me as the Bryce boys, and I hadn't even felt the full force of what their pheromones could do to my body.

Austin was spicy cinnamon and oaky whiskey and a crackling fire while the winter winds blew gently outside.

Seth was that same cinnamon slathered all over a gooey pastry pulled from the oven while the cedar trees bloomed in the yard.

Even Cam seemed to be scent-sympathetic via his bond to Seth. He was a sinful, rich, and tangy orange mixed with cloves and Seth's cinnamon. Daisy said he'd smelled like a normal, clean citrus to her, so the bond biology was at work for my nose only.

I didn't think they knew what I was or what we possibly were to each other, or else they'd have thrown me over any one of their wide, muscular shoulders and spirited me away to their lair where they probably had a nest ready and waiting for their perfect OFS princess.

But they were curious, at least. They'd caught a whiff of *something* they'd liked when the pheromones I'd done my best to incinerate flashed a signal at them like a distressed ship in a storm. I wasn't sure if that was why they'd been hanging around, watching the store and keeping tabs on my comings and goings or if they'd convinced themselves I knew something about Sally's disappearance.

Both, most likely.

“Should I call Sally at the Center and thank her for finding me a scent-matched pack the same weekend I missed my suppressant dose?”

“You should not do that, no.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said, chuckling as I slowed the truck. We were approaching the Riley trailer houses, and the less noise, the better. “I wonder why she had the store’s main number on her hidden sticky note,” I said. “Dad’s secure line would’ve been better, but I know you didn’t give her anything that could be traced to us, since she was so heavily watched.”

Daisy shrugged. “They took her phone away after the bonding. My guess is, she found a non-suspicious way to look up the store’s number somehow after I told her that was where I worked. Like maybe she asked one of those assholes to look up the website for some bullshit reason. I’m just... sad I couldn’t be there for her more.”

“You did everything you could, Dase. Now we need to be there for Mary Rose.”

I pulled off the driveway and parked under a thick grove of trees. Daisy put her ridiculous cat beanie back on her head, then she tucked her switchblade into the sheath on her thigh.

“The Riley dicks still at the big V-Day kegger over at the Hansen ranch?” I asked.

She scrolled through her phone. “Trina Mae says everyone’s been spotted except Tim-Tom. Jesse’s in a photo with his tongue down some girl’s throat. Still no Mary Rose.”

Daisy had access to a few party attendees’ social media as well as a contact on the ground who she’d convinced to message us updates. Trina Mae had informed her of this little Valentine’s Day pasture party about two hours ago, and we’d seized the moment to come snoop in Jesse Riley’s business.

“Right. Let’s do this.”

We climbed out of the truck, and then we went our separate ways.

I crept through the trees, taking care to step lightly in my hiking boots, until I reached the edge of the wide clearing where the Rileys had set up their pack compound. Two old Ford pickup trucks were parked in the yard, and just beyond them was a firepit, the embers dying but still emitting a little smoke. Beer cans littered the area around it.

“Status, Daisy,” I whispered.

Her soft voice crackled in my earpiece. “Two trailers empty. Tim-Tom is in the one on the far right, unfortunately still awake. I think he’s watching porn on his laptop.”

“Give me thirty seconds, then flush him out.”

“Got it.”

I darted into the yard, keeping clear of the small area lit by the trailers’ yellowy porch lights. I ducked behind one of the trucks, paused for a breath, then pulled my face covering over my mouth and nose.

“Okay, Daisy. You’re on.”

A loud bang sounded against the side of the trailer on the right, echoing violently in the still night air. Faint sounds of stomping inside came next, then Tim-Tom appeared, staggering out onto the small front stoop of his home.

He lifted a hunting rifle to his shoulder and pointed it wildly around, searching for danger.

A dark figure in a purple sweatshirt and cat ears fell from the roof, latching onto his back like a rabid chimpanzee.

I bolted from my hiding place. After a few quick strides, I leapt onto Tim-Tom’s stoop, coming at him from the side. I kicked his rifle from his hands while Daisy wrapped her spindly-but-strong arms around his neck. She squeezed, and he flailed wildly, clawing at her.

I pulled my pistol from my belt and slammed the butt into the side of his head. He crumpled, and Daisy released him before he took her down with him.

“Nice,” I said, breathing hard. “Let’s drag him inside. I’ll let you do the honors.” I tossed her some zip ties from my belt.

She snatched them from the air and shoved them into the pouch of her sweatshirt like a cat-eared kangaroo. “Sweet.”

We hefted Tim-Tom between us and dragged him back through the front door. With simultaneous grunts, we deposited him on the threadbare couch, then Daisy decided to be cute and hogtie his hands and feet together.

“Go,” she urged me. “I bet Jones has the center trailer, and Trina Mae said Jesse’s living with him now. I’ll clear this one.”

“On it. Did you get a read on the Bryces while you were in the back?”

“I think Cam’s in a tree behind the compound. The other two must be out front somewhere.”

They’d been about twenty yards behind me on the way in, but who knew what they were up to now. I assumed they’d seen the show out front just now, but it didn’t worry me too terribly much.

I wasn’t sure what it was about the Bryces that made me think they’d be cool with watching us knock a guy out and break into his house—certainly not deep-seated bonds of trust—but I now knew a little bit about the kind of business Bryce Solutions conducted, and this sort of thing was child’s play to them. I might’ve also been... *daring* them to look further into a pack like the Rileys.

Just as I hoped they’d do with the Browns.

I sure wished I didn’t care what the Bryce Pack thought about *anything*, but that wasn’t the hand I’d been dealt, and I didn’t have time to dwell.

“Nice of them to let us burgle uninterrupted,” I said to Daisy with a wry laugh.

Daisy yanked one last time on Tim-Tom’s bindings. “They’re not the cops, so they don’t give a shit. It’s like you said at the family meeting—they’ll watch us long enough to realize we’re not the bad guys, then they’ll either go away or go full court press to get into your pants.”

“I did not say that last part,” I grumbled.

She rolled her eyes and waved me away. “Go already!”

“Fine.”

I strolled out the door, hopped off the stoop, and walked about twenty feet to the front door of the middle trailer. Humming the chorus of “illicit affairs,” I whipped my lockpick kit from my belt and made quick work of popping the flimsy lock on Jones’s front door.

The house was neater than I’d expected. I shined my little flashlight around the small kitchen and living room—a few dishes in the sink, a nice leather couch and an even nicer television, no immediately offensive smells other than a hint of cigar smoke.

“Hello?” I whispered. “Mary Rose?”

Silence. Hadn’t expected it to be that easy.

I took a right and made my way to the bedroom on the west end of the trailer. The blue-and-white varsity letterman jacket draped over the small desk chair told me this was Jesse’s room. It smelled like socks and musky baby Alpha, the pile of dirty clothes strewn across the bed not so different from how Daisy kept her room most days.

I cleared the closet and under the bed, then I sat down at Jesse’s desk to peruse his papers.

Piles of homework and dog-eared American classic paperbacks—I recognized the assigned reading from my own senior English class. A stack of porn magazines—*what is this, 1999, Jesse?*—and an odd flyer peeking out from under his copy of *Frankenstein*.

I read the large, bold lettering printed across the top of the stained piece of sepia paper: *Pack Rights Militia*. Underneath in smaller letters: *REAL Alpha Males don’t let the government tell them who and when to bond*.

The rest of the flyer consisted of an illustrated picture of four comically large Alpha men with bulging muscles, beards, and an array of weapons strapped to their bodies.

In front of them was a tiny caricature of an omega girl—huge boobs, tiny waist, long, thin legs. She was dressed in lingerie, and she stared demurely at the ground while her Alphas menaced behind her.

She also wore a fucking collar attached to a leash that one of the Alphas gripped in his meaty hand.

The picture made my eye twitch with rage, and I did not have a good feeling about its presence in the Rileys' house.

In the corner of the flyer, Jesse had scribbled in teenage-boy chicken scratch: *2/17 9pm Manny's.*

I took a photo with my phone. February 17th was this Saturday.

I opened the top drawer and discovered Jesse's tablet. "Score," I whispered into the darkness.

Jesse had his phone with him, but with any luck, his texts and emails would also populate to his tablet.

I stashed it inside my vest. *Mine now, you little perv.*

"I'm almost finished in the other trailer," Daisy said in my ear. "It's messy as shit in here, but no Mary Rose or anything out of the ordinary."

"Okay," I replied. "I'm headed into Jones's room, then I'll be out."

I scurried back through the living room and to the other end of the house. Jones's room was cleaner than Jesse's, though not by much, and it appeared they shared the same taste in glossy pornography of the non-digital variety. Jones did not have a desk, but I rifled through his dresser drawers for the fun of it. I found two handguns, several boxes of condoms, a glass pipe that smelled like weed, and a folded piece of paper that turned out to be the same Pack Rights Militia flyer from Jesse's room.

Jones had also scrawled some notes on the flyer. I squinted, holding my flashlight close, and I could just make out the word *Candidates* and three names along with partial addresses.

Talulah Klein - 4489 RR 114 Apt ??

Lily Linnartz - 3213 Brazos Ln

Mary Rose Jackson - ??

Ice seeped into my veins. I didn't know who Lily was, but Talulah Klein was an omega teenager who was a friend of Mary Rose. She was probably around sixteen now, and Grandma Anya had mentioned her once to me, lamenting that Mary Rose's friend had refused Anya's suggestion to take control of her life by utilizing the resources my family could provide after her designation had presented.

Talulah had stars in her eyes and romantic notions of pack life, so she'd happily registered with USDPU and was awaiting the day she was old enough to be matched.

Mom and I had told Anya, gently, that Talulah had made her choice and that was what mattered.

I tucked the flyer into my pocket on the off chance this was Jones's only copy and he might forget which unfortunate girls he and this PRM group wanted to target.

Daisy buzzed in my ear. "You better get out here."

"Yeah, I'm coming," I replied. "It looks like we now have three girls to find."

"What are you talking about?"

I replaced the other items I'd removed and closed Jones's drawers before hustling to the door. I closed it softly behind me, popped the lock back in place, then turned to look for Daisy.

She stood in front of the now-dead fire, her arms crossed and her green eyes narrowed at the lawn chairs positioned near the pit.

Austin and Seth lounged in those chairs, still outfitted in their matching tough-guy investigator outfits, both staring at me with amused curiosity. The soft yellow glow of the porch lights illuminated the hard lines of their bodies and chiseled jaws, two dark and dangerous predators who now had me in their sights.

Daisy pointed at them. “Found the other two.”

DYLAN

“Can we help you?” I asked the hot, nosy idiots. “Daisy and I are wrapping up this little outing and would rather not delay.”

“We can see that,” Austin replied, running that serious golden-brown gaze up and down my body. “And what a coincidence we happened to be... walking by in time to witness you disarm and pistol-whip an Alpha in front of his own house. Why don’t you tell us why we shouldn’t call the cops?”

“Oh, cut the crap,” Daisy huffed with a dramatic eye roll. “If you guys cared, you would’ve stepped in a long time ago. You’re just out here snooping because you like following Dylan around.”

Seth snorted. “Guess we haven’t been as sneaky as we thought, brother.”

I shrugged. “You guys are pretty good, but so are we.”

“Clearly,” a deep voice said behind us.

I whipped around to find Cam sitting on the roof of Jones’s trailer, his booted feet swinging lazily.

Daisy waved cheerfully. “Hey, Cam.”

He pointed at her, attempting a stern look that was mostly just adorable. “You scared the shit out of me, young lady. No more jumping off roofs. I almost had a heart attack when I couldn’t see whether you’d landed safely.”

“The view from the front was worse,” Austin added wryly.

“Critique our B&E skills later,” I said, crossing my arms, lifting my chin, and thanking the stars that the still night offered no breeze to waft their universe-altering scents into my nose. “There are no missing omega girls in these houses. Trust me, we checked.”

“Did you now?” Seth asked with a dangerous smile that made my knees wobble. “Is that what you were looking for?”

“So, there’s nothing going on here that pertains to your investigation,” I went on. “Which means what we’re doing is none of your business. We’re leaving, and I suggest you do the same before the Rileys stumble home from their kegger.”

Cam vaulted down from the roof with the lithe grace of a mountain lion. He skipped down the steps of the tiny front stoop and came to a stop next to me. He’d tied his long, silky hair in an elegant knot on the back of his head, and the low light caught his blue eyes, tranquil and deep as a lagoon in paradise. I braced against his mouthwatering orange scent as it invaded my entire body.

He held out his arm to me. “Sounds good to me. May I escort you back to your vehicle, Miss St. James?”

I caved to the all-consuming desire to wrap my hand around his defined bicep. “Sure. Let me just make sure we’re still all clear.”

Austin and Seth had hopped to their feet to take up posts on either side of Daisy. “What do you mean?” Austin asked.

“Hey,” I said into my earpiece. “Any sign of them?”

“No,” the deep voice of our backup replied. “Haven’t seen one car in the past half hour.”

“Cool. If you want to come down the driveway and meet us, we’re headed back to the truck.”

“Will do.”

Seth blew out a breath as we walked back toward the tree line. “I feel slightly better about this whole situation knowing you had Derrick watching your back.”

“Mmhm,” I replied, somehow managing to be cool and aloof while clinging to Cam’s arm like a smitten idiot.

Daisy snickered as she ambled along between the brothers, no longer bothering to tread silently in her fuzzy winter boots. She turned and waggled her eyebrows at me, and she was met with my unimpressed stare.

When we finally reached my truck, we found a second, larger truck parked behind it and the hulking figure of my dad leaning up against the driver’s side door.

Austin and Seth slowed their steps as Daisy peeled away to trot around to the passenger side of my truck with a shit-eating grin.

“Oh,” Cam said, his normally jovial tone turning wary. “That is not your brother.”

“Nope.”

I released his arm, and I bit back a laugh as he straightened his spine and moved to stand next to Seth.

Dad was fighting an amused smile as he shot me a *look*, then he pushed off his truck to stand to his full height as he took in the boys of the Bryce Pack.

Austin puffed up under Dad’s scrutinizing gaze, though he refrained from a direct challenge. Dad was only *just* taller than Austin, but he was still quite a bit bulkier.

“Good evening, Mr. St. James,” Austin said, gruff but friendly. “I’m Austin Bryce, and these are my pack brothers, Seth and Cameron.”

Dad eyed him curiously. “You’re Rodrigo’s boys?”

“You know our dad?”

“I know of him and Bryce Solutions, yes. Rodrigo and I had mutual friends in the Army.”

The guys relaxed the tiniest bit at that statement of familiarity until my dad spoke again, sharper this time. “Do you want to explain to me why you’ve been following my daughter around?”

Austin cleared his throat, and the other two might've winced. "We're in the middle of an active investigation regarding a missing omega who was taken from her home a few nights ago," he replied carefully. "And I will just say that Dylan is a... person of interest."

Dad hummed like he was thinking that over. He knew, as did my whole family, what I suspected these men were to me. Instead of being horrified when I came clean, he and Mom had almost seemed... relieved.

I understood it. My dad would never stand in my way if I decided I wanted to bond with a pack someday, despite his own terrible family history. He only ever wanted me to have a choice about how to live my life.

The Bryce Pack *could* be a way out of the risky situation that constantly threatened to bury me, hiding from the government and living one black-market suppressant dose to the next. They represented a place to land if the worst happened—a place that wasn't jail followed by being thrust at the first pack that would accept an older, non-virgin omega with fucked-up hormones and a criminal record.

I felt the spark of our connection, and I was painfully attracted to all three of them, but we didn't *know* the Bryce boys. We'd determined that they hailed from the Palisades and that their parents' pack was well known and richer than God. If they were looking to bond, they'd be expected to find their omega at the OFS, not working in a fucking hardware store in Merchant Village.

I didn't want to bond with any pack, not even one that might be my scent-matched mates, and especially not out of desperation. I liked my life exactly as it was, risks and all, and I would cling to it until my fingers were bloody stumps. I didn't want to be an *omega*, period.

Even Alphas who were not abusive toxic assholes were still *Alphas*—they were programmed to covet and protect their omega, and I doubted even the Bryces would be cool with their omega running around, breaking into houses, and rescuing girls in need.

They might not even let me work at all.

I would be expected to look pretty, keep house, and open my legs to take their knots—and my own hormones would demand that last part loudly and often.

I didn't know what would happen if Federico didn't come through in time and the Bryces were still hanging around, but I wouldn't waste energy worrying about it now, not while Mary Rose was still out there somewhere.

“She's not a person of interest in the way you may be thinking,” Seth added, giving my dad a sheepish smile. “We're just trying to gather all the relevant facts to our case.”

Cam seemed slightly more at ease than the other two, his pleasing grin seeming as effortless as usual. “The safety of our missing omega is the *top* priority, sir.”

We were all dancing around something here, but they weren't going to ask outright, and we certainly weren't going to tell them.

Dad's probing gaze slid to him. “Is that a fact?”

“Yes, sir.”

Dad looked at me. “Do you believe them, Dylan?”

The quivering little omega voice in my brain wanted desperately to believe these men—*her* men—were *good*, but she was overpowered by Dylan the cynical beta. I shrugged and said, “Not yet.” I paused, casting a hard look over at the guys. All three of them now watched me, their stares consuming, almost pleading. “Maybe if they start taking a harder look at who's *really* out there hurting defenseless omegas, their priorities might shift in the right direction.”

They continued to stare at me. Austin in particular was trying to bore a hole into my head with those deep amber eyes. He nodded, then turned back to Dad. “We're parked down the road a ways, so we better keep moving. It was nice to meet you, Mr. St. James.”

Dad nodded, his face carefully neutral.

Seth's eyes were almost black in the heavy darkness. "Bye, Dylan," he whispered.

Cam gave me a forlorn little wave then gave a happier one to Daisy, who was leaning out my truck window, watching us avidly.

"Bye, guys," I whispered back.

They trudged ahead, disappearing into the night within a minute.

I looked at Dad. "Let's talk at home."

He nodded again, then climbed into his truck.

I jumped into my own vehicle, then slumped in the seat and blew out a long breath. I unzipped my vest and handed Jesse's tablet to Daisy.

"Oh, hell yeah," she said. "We're gonna nail these bastards."

I jammed my finger into the truck's ignition button with more force than necessary. "I really fucking hope so."



WHEN WE GOT HOME, we decided to let everyone sleep, and then we gathered around our small kitchen table the next morning before Daisy had to leave for school and went over what we'd discovered at the Rileys'.

Derrick and my parents eyed the PRM flyer with thinly veiled disgust. Jesse's tablet also lay unlocked on the table next to the French press, open to his text messaging app.

My brother arched a brow at Daisy. "You unlocked the tablet already? It usually takes Dad's contact days to break into one of those."

"I guessed his passcode," Daisy replied with a lazy shrug.

"Seriously?"

"He's a seventeen-year-old boy," Daisy said, enunciating like she was speaking to a small child. "It was 6-9-6-9."

Dad and Derrick snorted. I rolled my eyes so hard, I was lucky they didn't get stuck in the back of my skull while Mom gave my hand a sympathetic pat.

"*Anyway,*" Daisy went on, "Jesse's texts to Jones mention picking Mary Rose up at the end of her shift at the Dairy Cone on the night she went missing. That's the only time Mary Rose is mentioned in Jesse's texts, and I think it's weird as hell that he mentioned it to his brother at all."

"And it links him to her disappearance," I added. "Much more strongly than just our hunch based on our general dislike of the Rileys and Anya's mentioning Jesse."

"Where could he have taken her if she wasn't being held at their house?" Mom mused aloud. "And what in the world for?"

I jammed my finger at the PRM flyer containing Jones's list of names. "It must have something to do with this regressive macho bullshit, right?"

"Yes," Dad replied, glaring at the flyer. The image of the angry Alphas with their omega on a leash probably conjured the painful memories of his upbringing. "I've never heard of this Pack Rights Militia, but if they're running around preaching to disgruntled Alphas about their rights to bonding without government processes or approval, I'd say that's a very bad thing to be brewing around vulnerable young omega girls."

"And Mary Rose's name is written right fucking there," Derrick added, jamming his finger into the flyer.

I leaned back in my chair and took a big swig of my coffee, which did nothing to calm my roiling stomach. "Except that Mary Rose has been faithfully on her suppressants since she presented last year, and PRM appears to be very focused on the idea of the perfect omega. Why is she on this list?"

Daisy looked at me, frowning. "Mary Rose is fourteen years old, and Jesse Riley is a sweet-talking golden boy with big Alpha muscles and the star of the South Ranch High football team. She might've done something... dumb."

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Regardless,” Dad cut in, “this group is now our top priority. Derrick and Daisy, after school today you’ll head out to check on the other two girls on this list. I will start compiling what I can find online about the Pack Rights Militia. Dylan, you’re on your best behavior for now.”

I scowled at him over the rim of my mug. “What?”

“Those Bryce boys aren’t going to stop sticking their noses in your business, honey,” he said, his voice gentling. “And with your... precarious situation, it might be better if you were a little less interesting to them.”

“It’s okay if you *want* to be interesting to them,” Mom added, slanting a glance at Dad. “But we know that isn’t really in your plans.”

“No, it is not,” I agreed.

Daisy snorted. “Be real. They aren’t going anywhere. After last night, they *have* to suspect Dylan’s the one who sprang Sally and beat up Don the Douche. We’re just all hoping they’ll show us that they can tell right from wrong so we can rest easy that Dylan’s scent-matched mates aren’t assholes *in the event the worst happens*.”

We all just stared at her because no one had a rebuttal—especially not me.

Derrick shot a concerned look in my direction.

I reached over and squeezed his hand, mouthing, “*I’ll be fine*,” at him.

He squinted at me, not convinced, before he was back to glaring at the PRM flyer. “I’ll go to this meeting at Manny’s on Saturday night,” he announced. “I’m an Alpha and the right age to be unbonded and disgruntled.”

I’d shown them the picture of Jesse’s note written on the flyer. Manny’s was an old bar and grill on the southern edge of the city that had a large outdoor space for live music and dancing.

A perfect space for a bunch of hotheaded Alpha dicks to hold a meeting.

“Okay then,” Dad said, unfolding his massive frame from his chair. “We all have our marching orders. Daisy, off to school with you.”

“I will renew my motion to transition to homeschool so I can help out around here more.”

“Motion denied. Your hammock will be fine without you between the hours of nine and three, Monday through Friday,” Dad replied wryly.

“Ugh, *fine*.”

She stood up with a groan, like the entire world was sitting on her shoulders, before shouldering her backpack and marching toward the door.

Derrick downed the rest of his coffee before jumping to his feet. He leaned over my chair and squeezed me in a hug. “I’ll help Dad out this morning, then I’ll take over your shift this afternoon.”

“Thanks, bud.”

He released me and ambled away. I stretched in my chair, giving Mom what I hoped was an encouraging smile as I readied myself for what I was determined would be a normal day of work.

I would set aside my increasing worry for Mary Rose’s safety while I couldn’t do anything for her.

I would ignore the dull itch under my skin warning that my body was beginning to withdraw from the suppressants.

And I would not think about my GQ GI Joe, Tattooed Boy, or golden beta god until my head hit the pillow in my not-nest that night.

AUSTIN

“If only Dylan could see us now,” Seth said, chuckling as he and Cam watched me pop the lock on the Browns’ back door.

“We are a trio of regular bandits,” Cam agreed, fiddling with his phone. “I want a beanie with the ears like Daisy’s for our next break-in. Okay, security system is disabled—we’re clear.”

I opened the door and stepped over the threshold and into the large modern kitchen that appeared unused except for the pile of takeout containers overflowing from the trashcan. “We are not breaking into this house like common criminals,” I grumbled. “We are... unconventionally accessing the site of our active investigation.”

Seth laughed as he stomped into the kitchen behind me. “Whatever you need to tell yourself, brother.”

I wanted to tell myself that my judgment with respect to my *clients*, who hired my team to find their kidnapped omega, wasn’t being clouded by my sudden and inexplicable fixation on a gorgeous beta girl I met at a hardware store.

A redheaded siren who was definitely engaged in criminal activity and almost certainly knew exactly where our clients’ omega had disappeared to.

A girl who smelled like a hint of heaven—a thing I’d never thought about any beta I’d ever met. Even the pleasant and much more pervasive scents of the omega girls we met at the OFS holiday party hadn’t enticed me quite like Dylan’s.

She almost smelled like... *mine*, and I sure as shit didn't know what to do with that thought.

So here we were, my brothers and I, sneaking into the Browns' house in broad fucking daylight while all four of them were at work because those big hazel eyes had looked so genuine, *imploring* us to dig further.

"Okay, everyone has their marching orders," I said as we crept through the living room and made for the stairs. "Cam has Sally's room, and Seth and I will split up the Alphas' rooms. We're looking for anything that might lead us to believe Sally was being mistreated and that her disappearance was... voluntary."

Cam hopped ahead of us on the staircase and tossed a teasing smile over his shoulder. "At the risk of sounding callous to Sally's potential plight, how badly do you want that to be the real story, fearless leader?"

I scowled at him. "I know how to be impartial, Cameron."

"None of us are impartial about Dylan," Seth said from behind me. "And now that we've seen her drop an Alpha and barely break a sweat with our own eyes, we can't pretend she isn't the one who broke Don Brown's nose and stomped him in the ribs while fucking Derrick made off with his omega."

"Fifty bucks says Daisy was there too," Cam added. "I'm unsure whether I'm impressed or scandalized by what her two years as ward of the St. James family has turned her into."

"The girl killed her own father, Cam," I pointed out grimly.

He sighed as we crested the stairs. "Yeah, the bastard deserved it. A few days ago, I hacked into the public children's hospital's records database and found out that Daisy had been admitted for treatment seven times between the ages of ten and thirteen. And no one gave a fuck, apparently."

The thought made me sick to my stomach. Another puzzle piece that would only fit one way—and that way was not one that involved Daisy becoming complicit to the kidnapping and potential trafficking of omega girls.

I stopped in the middle of the hallway and held up a hand. “Listen up. We’re going to be objective about this. At the end of the day, we need to know where Sally Brown is, and we need to determine whether it’s appropriate to bring her back to her Alphas. I want a clear picture of every-fucking-thing so that we can make the right decision.”

And we sure as shit were going to have to present a solid reason to our fathers if we decided to chuck our first clients to the curb and refund their exorbitant fees.

“On it, captain,” Cam said with a ridiculous salute, and then he disappeared down the hall and into Sally’s room.

Seth eyed me with uncharacteristic seriousness. “I don’t have a good feeling about this—about *them*.”

“I know.”

He turned and ducked into the nearest bedroom. I made my way to the end of the hall to the primary bedroom, which would belong to the pack’s leader, Anton.

It was a typical bedroom of a younger guy. No frills, no feminine touches—just a king-sized bed draped with a black quilt with matching dark wood furniture. A few expensive-looking framed art pieces hung on the walls, and there were T-shirts and basketball shorts strewn across the bed. His desk, tucked into a nook in front of the bedroom’s large window, was an unorganized mess of papers and computer equipment.

I sat in his desk chair and began to sift through the stacks. Bills, brochures, and investment reports from the private bank where I knew he worked as an analyst. A hardback copy of a book by a young, conservative pundit whose podcast had been gaining popularity with Alpha males in my age cohort.

After replacing everything that I’d moved on the surface, I went to open the top drawer.

Locked.

Child’s play. My lockpick kit was still on my belt, and I had it open even faster than I had the back door. I sifted through the pile of credit cards and blank checks.

I paused when my fingers brushed cool metal.

“What the...,” I murmured as I pulled out a stainless steel hasp with a matching door hinge. The screws were still inserted into the holes in both pieces, which meant they’d been mounted on a door somewhere. There was also a small padlock—just the right size to hook into the hasp—and a tiny key attached to a keychain sporting the bright red letters of the Brown Pack’s old college fraternity.

I dug into the drawer one more time and found a smart phone shoved to the back. It was dead, but the pink cover with flowers and kitty cats drawn on it told me this was not Anton’s phone.

“Cam!” I called, jumping to my feet and hurrying out into the hallway, the phone now in my pocket and the padlock kit clutched in my hand. I made my way to Sally’s room, pausing in the doorway.

Cam met me there. “What did you find?”

I studied the doorway. “There it is. Step into the hall and close the door.”

He did as I asked, his blue eyes full of concern. I held the small door hinge up, its four screws aligning perfectly with some holes that had been drilled in the doorframe. They were small, and I’d have missed them if I hadn’t known exactly what I was looking for. With the door shut, we could see the corresponding square of holes where the hasp had been screwed into the door.

“What...,” Cam murmured, his gaze sharpening as he examined the scene.

I held up the padlock and key, and his eyes widened with sudden understanding.

“Oh. Oh, they were *not*,” he hissed.

Seth lumbered out of one of the other bedrooms. “Cam, what was that? You felt *sharp* down the bond—” He came to a stop next to Cam, his tattooed hand running a soothing track down Cam’s back as we all stared at Sally’s door. “Oh, what the *fuck*...? They had a padlock on her fucking door?”

I nodded, the uneasy feeling in my gut intensifying by the minute. “I found the kit locked in Anton’s desk drawer.”

“Those assholes removed it before they called us,” Seth said as he stepped closer to examine the steel pieces hanging loosely from their screws where I’d haphazardly stuck them back into the existing holes. “Of course they did. We would’ve interrogated the shit out of them and then shoved their money back in their fucking faces if we thought they were treating their omega like a prisoner.”

I grunted. “Assuming we could’ve convinced Andrew.”

Seth pulled something from his pocket. It was a crumpled piece of paper, and he unfolded it before holding it up for Cam and me to view.

Across the top in big bold letters were the words *Pack Rights Militia*. In smaller type under the title it said, *REAL Alpha Males don’t let the government tell them who and when to bond*. Underneath was a drawing of a pack of Alphas—all caricatures of what the most meat-headed “man’s man” Alpha males thought was peak masculinity. They held a tiny omega girl in skimpy underwear on a leash.

Great.

“I found this in Don’s room,” Seth said, his nose wrinkling in disgust. “I haven’t heard of this PRM organization specifically, but I’m familiar with the ‘man-fluencer’ Alphas with podcasts and blogs where this shit comes from. These guys have an archaic and bullshit view of what a real Alpha is, and they don’t think very highly of omegas—or women in general. They’re entitled dickheads. They want servants, not mates.”

I ran a hand through my hair and took a moment to just... glare at the ceiling. “This just keeps getting better and better.”

Sensing Seth’s agitation, Cam snagged his hand and gave him a quick squeeze. Then he looked at me, his face a storm cloud. “There’s something else.”

He opened Sally’s door again, beckoning us inside. We followed, Seth and I stopping at the foot of Sally’s nest while

Cam rounded the side. He pulled back the gauzy curtain that surrounded the low four-poster bed, which now held only a faint echo of Sally's sweet strawberry scent. He pointed at the juncture where one of the bed's wooden columns met the headboard. "Does this look like damage from a restraint?"

I rushed forward, Seth on my heels. We crowded around the headboard, and I leaned down to examine the deep groove in the wood at the base of the bed's column. "Fuck," I whispered. "I mean... it could be anything, but this definitely reminds me of the photos from the Kain job Andrew and Rodrigo took last spring."

That had been another banner success for Bryce Solutions. The Kains were a famous pack from Lone Star Dominion—the equivalent of the Palisades in Capital City to our north. My fathers had extracted one of the pack's Alpha sons from where he was being held for ransom by a mercenary group in a downtown luxury hotel.

And they still wouldn't shut up about it.

"That was my thought too," Cam replied. "The kidnappers in that case handcuffed Knox Kain to the bed, and he did similar damage to the headboard by yanking on the restraint during his captivity."

I pulled my phone from my pocket and snapped some photos, making a mental note to do the same with the padlock before I stashed it back in Anton's desk. "So, the Browns bonded their seventeen-year-old omega last fall, pulled her out of high school a few months ago, and were possibly locking her in her room and restraining her in her nest. We have Don's flyer, which tells us that at least *some* of the Brown Pack Alphas have been flirting with regressive ideas regarding how Alphas should treat their omega."

"Like a fucking slave," Seth muttered.

"And the night she was taken, there were no signs of forced entry at her window, which leads us to believe she opened it voluntarily for her kidnappers. I also found Sally's phone locked in Anton's drawer, and I have a gut feeling it had been there long before she disappeared."

Cam held out his hand, and I passed him the phone. He would be able to pin down when it was last used.

I looked between the somber faces of my brothers. “Nothing is conclusive, but the needle is starting to point toward this being the rescue of an abused girl and not the kidnapping of a loved and cherished omega from her pack.”

“And a rescue much better fits the profile of the St. James family being our... perpetrators,” Cam added, his lips tipping up into a more characteristic smile. “I have no idea how they became involved in this, but Dylan and Daisy do love a good B&E by the light of the moon.”

Seth chuckled. “I’m starting to wish I’d been here to see Dylan put Don Brown on his fucking ass.”

“I’d be delighted to reenact it for you the next time we see him, babe,” Cam purred. “Assuming we can confirm our suspicions,” he added with a cheeky wink in my direction.

I blew out a breath, fighting the urge to rub my temples. “We need to close this case one way or another, which means we need to locate Sally Brown. I think we all know the fastest way to get that information, and if I have to nail Dylan to the wall and make her tell me where Sally is, I’ll do it—not like *that*, you assholes,” I added with a huff at their identical lascivious smirks.

Seth waggled his brows at me. “Whatever you say, brother. Cam and I are happy to nail her any which way we need to extract the information we want.”

“No.”

“Don’t tease me, Seth,” Cam whined. “You know I get cranky when I can’t have what I want.”

Seth pulled Cam into his arms and dropped a kiss on his lips. “I’ll be your consolation prize, babe.”

“Fine.”

I’d never tire of seeing my brother in love. The idea of that kind of true and everlasting love was foreign to me, as it was to most heterosexual Alpha males who could only casually

date beta women before choosing their forever omega. It floated around the back of my brain as a distant, pleasant notion—a thing that I’d someday look forward to sharing with Cam and Seth.

In our own time.

Right now, we had shit to do.

“All right,” I said, infusing my voice with the light bark that said I was giving orders. “Let’s put everything back where we found it and get the hell out of here. We have more research to do and a smart-mouthed redhead to shake down.”



BY THE TIME the sun began to set that afternoon, we’d made moderate progress.

Cam pulled the Browns’ cell phone records and determined that Sally’s phone hadn’t been in use for at least three months. Seth managed to ferret his way into some hidden chatrooms and threads devoted to the Pack Rights Militia, and by five o’clock he’d even secured himself an invitation into the local chapter’s secret Discord server.

I spent a few hours going back over the Brown Pack’s records with USDPU regarding Sally’s bonding. As we noted the first time we checked into it, everything appeared aboveboard—Sally had been introduced to a few different local packs before she chose to bond with the Browns. The only anomaly, if you could call it that, was that the Browns had only been on the USDPU waiting list for six months before they were called up to meet Sally.

Most packs would wait *years*.

While the Brown Pack didn’t have the funds or the status to court an omega at OFS, it appeared they were able to grease the wheels at the local USDPU well enough, effectively buying their way to the top of the list.

We now had a little more color on the Browns, but we were still no closer to locating Sally herself to ensure she was safe, confirm our suspicions, and close the case.

It was time to chat with someone who *did* have an idea where Sally was, and that was how I found myself walking into the gym down the street from St. James & Co., ready to intrude upon Dylan's usual evening workout.

I'd had to win two rounds of rock, paper, scissors to get to be the first one to see her again because we'd decided it was wiser not to overwhelm her with the whole pack. She needed the space to get to know each of us, and she needed to trust that the knowledge of Sally's whereabouts would be safe in our hands.

And if I was being honest, I wanted to know her, too, beyond how great she smelled, how hot she looked in tactical pants and boots, and the need to know what she did so that we could close our case.

I sauntered through the open bay doors, dressed in my training shorts and a tank top. The gym had been converted from a couple of warehouses into an open industrial space, and I liked what I saw.

A few rows of cardio equipment on the right-hand side. A giant rig in the middle where patrons did pull-ups, squats, and other strength training exercises. A large sparring mat on the left, currently occupied by a jiu-jitsu class.

It didn't take long for my eager gaze to locate Dylan, her dark hair glowing like a ruby beacon under the gym's fluorescent lighting. She was at her squat rack, giving me a prime view of her fantastic ass in spandex while she jammed to something in her earbuds. And she was *alone*—no Derrick, no Daisy.

Like a heat-seeking missile, I stalked straight for her, and I didn't stop until I was behind her, mere feet from her backside as she shouldered her barbell to prepare for her next set. I took in the perfect curve of her neck, the defined muscles of her back visible under her loose tank top, and the bunching of her lean biceps as she gripped the bar.

Most of all, I savored that faint-but-decadent chocolate-and-espresso fragrance now that I was close enough to get a tantalizing little whiff of her.

I willed my rioting hormones to calm the hell down because I was not here just so I could creep on the hot beta girl who may or may not be some kind of vigilante.

Losing focus was exactly how I could royally fuck this up, and I refused to allow that to happen on my first solo case.

Dylan stiffened as I closed in behind her, releasing a tiny gasp. “Austin.”

I bit back a pleased growl. She not only knew my scent, but she knew it well enough to differentiate me from Seth after meeting us all of twice—something that took most people much longer.

I leaned in, hoping my voice penetrated her music as I murmured right next to her ear. “Need a spot?”

DYLAN

I reined in a full-body tremble as Austin's spicy, masculine scent wrapped its gentle-but-firm hands around me. I needed to finish my squats, damnit, not get drunk on cinnamon and whiskey.

"This is my last set," I replied, not daring a look over my shoulder. "But sure, if I look wobbly, feel free to step in."

There, that was diplomatic.

Except he took that as an invitation to move the last few inches he needed to press his large chest to my back, his corded forearms shooting out on either side of me and readying to hook under my arms if I needed help out of my squat. I dipped under the weight, and he dutifully followed me down, squatting behind me while his minty breath ghosted along the back of my sweaty neck.

Up and down we went for a count of five, my pulse pounding and my core tightening as his body unknowingly called to mine. I managed to pop out of my last squat without his help, and I slammed my barbell into the rack before I turned to face him.

The man was in his workout clothes, giving me and the entire gym a great view of his thick thighs and broad, muscular chest. He wore a tank top, his bare arms on display, revealing—to my delight—that Seth wasn't the only tattooed Bryce brother. A large red rose spanned the length of his veiny forearm, and intertwined with it was what looked like a

larkspur stem, its tiny violet flowers popping against the deep red of the rose.

How dare you walk in here looking like that, sir?

“What are you doing here?” I asked instead. “Get tired of using your personal gym at your Palisades mansion?”

His smile was the slightest bit cocky. “Did you look into us, Firecracker?”

I scowled at the pet name even though it gave me a pleasant stomach flutter. “Firecracker?”

“Your hair glows like fire under these lights, and after what I witnessed last night, I’m certain you’d explode in the face of anyone who tried to fuck with you.”

I couldn’t blame the urge to *purr* at that statement entirely on the sleepy omega I kept caged in my body—Dylan the badass beta was preening because this big dangerous Alpha recognized her hard-earned skills.

“Well, you’d be right about that,” I replied, grinning. Out of habit, I lifted the hem of my tank top to wipe the sweat off my face, and I caught the dip of his amber eyes as he checked out my bare stomach. “And yes, of course we looked into the Bryce Pack. You’re not hard to find.”

“I suppose we aren’t,” he replied with a shrug. “But your research missed that I moved my pack out of my parents’ mansion a few months ago. The pool house was too small for the three of us if I didn’t want to hear the particulars of what Seth and Cam got up to in their bedroom.”

I casually fanned my face. “I’m not sure what you mean by that. Can you describe it? In detail, please.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m certain either one of them would love to tell you all about it. Or, better yet, offer you a live demonstration.”

Abort, Dylan. Before you start perfuming all over the goddamn gym.

I cleared my throat. “So, where do you guys live now, then?”

“We bought a... large condo in a new tower downtown.”

“Oh, wow. *Outside* the gates of the Palisades? Out here amongst the unwashed masses?”

“Yes, smartass.”

“That’s very brave. This is a big scary world. Some of us even have to clean our own bathrooms.”

He crossed those big arms and arched a dark brow at me. “You finished?”

“Yep.”

“Good, then you can show me around my new gym. Our building’s gym is... nice, but this one is a little more my speed.”

I paused with my water bottle halfway to my lips. “You guys are joining my gym?”

He grinned. “I got us a trial month—what’s up, Kade?” He nodded at Kade, one of Derrick’s buddies who ran this place, as Kade ambled by.

“Oh, hey, Austin!” Kade waved as he passed, his blond man-bun and beard giving him the air of a cheery Viking. “Let me know if you have questions!”

“Traitor,” I hissed at him under my breath.

Austin’s grin grew wider. “Come on, Dylan,” he said as he stepped around me to strip the weights from my barbell with one hand like they weighed nothing. He racked them in an orderly fashion, then he jerked his head toward the sparring mat. “Let’s see what you got.”

Well, that was an offer I could hardly refuse.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “You can hold the mitts for me.”

I hoisted my gym bag over my shoulder and marched toward the far side of the gym where the Thursday-night jiu-jitsu class was just finishing up. Austin strolled along next to me like we were good buddies, and he tossed a bro-nod to Baron, another of the gym’s owners, because apparently

Austin *was* good buddies with everyone in Merchant Village now.

I dropped my bag to the floor next to the mat, bent to dig inside, located the sparring mitts I usually used with Derrick or Dad, and tossed them at Austin's head. The fucker caught them easily, and then he gave me a chastising little glare like I was a naughty child. It was annoying and also extremely hot.

I wrapped up my hands, toed off my shoes, then bounded onto the mat. Austin squared up in front of me, holding the mitts up for me like a pro, and I began to throw some light punches at them to warm up.

"You know," Austin said as I worked. "We did a little digging on the pack that owns the trailers you and Daisy made a house call to last night."

"Oh?" I slammed my fist harder into his right hand, and he grunted.

"They seem like a normal, hardworking pack of blue-collar Alphas, so we weren't sure why you two troublemakers felt the need to knock one of them out and break into their home," he mused, and I punched his other hand with equal force. "Fuck, Firecracker. Ease up."

"If you can't handle me, I'll get Kade over here. He never minds holding my mitts."

That got a glower out of him. "Absolutely not, and I'll just bet he doesn't."

I smirked, resuming my punches and going lighter so I wouldn't tire out and lose face after talking a big game. "The Riley Pack are a bunch of backwards assholes who enjoy harassing women," I informed him. "They don't need your sympathy."

"You know, we have access to the USDPU database for our current investigation," he said as he began to dance around the mat, making me chase his hands. "The Rileys don't have an omega. They aren't even on the list for one."

That made me pause. We were aware that they hadn't bonded an omega yet, but we did *not* know they hadn't even

put their names on the list to be matched with one.

Austin went on. “So, we figured you and Daisy weren’t out there to spirit another girl away from her pack—what? Why are you frowning?”

I ignored his casual attempt to get me to admit we’d been the ones to “spirit” Sally away from the assholes who called themselves her pack. “The Rileys aren’t on the list for an omega?”

He shook his head. “No. We figured that wasn’t the norm, but not every pack wants to bond as soon as they’re eligible.”

I snorted. “Uh, yeah, they do. Jones Riley has nothing else on the brain except shoving his knot into the first omega girl they can convince to bond with them. He’ll never truly be the Alpha King of South Ranch until he does.”

And now I was growing increasingly worried they were planning to secure an omega by... other means.

Austin’s eyes had narrowed, his intense focus battering at me like a tidal wave against a seawall. “You find the fact that they aren’t on the USDPU waitlist... distressing?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

I sighed. “Austin.”

“Dylan.”

“I know you mean well—you and Cam and Seth—but this isn’t your business. It has nothing to do with your case.”

His unwavering gaze never left my face even as I continued to shuffle on my bare feet, raining punches into the mitts. “I don’t know about that,” he said. “The way you described the Riley Pack is not far off of how I *might* describe Sally Brown’s pack.”

I paused again, ensnared by his dark honey eyes as I caught my breath. I resisted the urge to snap, “No shit,” at him lest he get what he came for—an admission from me that I

knew more than I'd let on about Sally's disappearance. Instead, I frowned and asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean we're starting to suspect that returning Sally to her pack might not be in her best interest."

My stomach fluttered with the thrill that they were finding their way to the truth, but I managed a skeptical look. "Wouldn't that be contrary to what your *clients* hired you to do? With a lot of money?"

He nodded. "It would. But I would clear it with our CEO and take the loss. That's not who we are, Dylan."

A drop of honesty slipped from my lips. "I want very badly to believe that, Austin."

His answering smile was warm and beautiful, and I needed to punch him in the face or something before my body started making demands that would get me in big fucking trouble.

"But to close this case," he went on, his voice pitched low like he was confiding in me, "we *need* to know where Sally is. We need to interview her, confirm our suspicions, then figure out how to handle it with our clients and with our bosses."

There—he finally got down to the real reason he was paying me a visit.

"Good luck with that," I said, then I dropped, kicking my leg out, and I swept his legs out from under him.

"Dylan, what the hell!" he barked as he hit the ground hard. Unfortunately, he did not stay down. He rolled, more agile than a man of his size had any right to be, and after tossing the mitts from his hands, he was on me.

We grappled, and I quickly realized my jiu-jitsu was rustier than his was. His boozy cinnamon scent surged as he flipped me off him. His nostrils flared as, I was sure, he'd just received a little blast of my scent, my buried omega desperately waving at him as the feel of his big body pressed against mine sparked a quick rev and sputter of my struggling hormones.

He had me just about folded in half on the mat, valiantly attempting to get me to tap out, but I was sweaty and slippery.

“Dylan,” he growled. “Submit. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I wiggled out of his hold. “Try harder, Bryce.”

“What in the ever-loving fuck is going on over here?”

We both froze.

Austin let loose a frustrated exhale. I popped my head out from under his arm. “Hey, Derrick.”

My brother stood at the edge of the mat, dressed in the gray sweatpants and fitted long-sleeved T-shirt he’d been wearing when he left earlier this afternoon to pick Daisy up from school for their assigned errand. He crossed his arms over his chest, and he was giving me the *have you lost your goddamn mind* look I loved so much.

Daisy was here as well, her oversized sweatshirt hanging to her knees over her yoga pants as she pretended to be nonchalantly stretching in the vicinity.

Austin rolled off me and glided to his feet. He held out a hand, and I grabbed hold to pull myself to standing so that I could face the music too.

Derrick glared at Austin, who returned his expression with an unconcerned look that bordered on a cocky smirk.

“Wanna explain what you’re doing in my gym with your hands all over my sister, man?”

I raised a finger. “To be fair, I started it.”

“She did,” Austin agreed. “And I’m a member here now, St. James. Your boy Kade hooked me up.”

“Ooh, are Cam and Seth joining too?” Daisy asked.

Austin grinned at her. “They are.”

“Awesome,” she replied. She stripped her sweatshirt over her head, revealing her sparkly pink sports bra, and then she trotted over to Austin and grabbed his hand. “Come spot me on my bench press, Austin B.”

Austin let out a surprised chuckle. “Um, sure. Lead the way.”

“Daisy,” Derrick growled. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Making those *gains*, Derrick!” she hollered as she dragged Austin away.

My brother watched them go with a furrowed brow. I stepped next to him, waving a hand in front of his face. “Leave it. She’s getting him out of my hair when he was about to really put the hard press on me about Sally. Tell me what you and Daisy found out.”

He shot one last eye-dagger at Austin’s back, then he looked at me. “Talulah is fine. Came home from school as normal today. We advised her mom to take her to visit her grandmother in Fort Wayne for the next week or so until we can figure out what the fuck is going on. Lily Linnartz is missing. Has been since Monday.”

“Shit.”

“I know. Her parents told us she doesn’t attend the same high school as Mary Rose and Jesse Riley, but she has friends in South Ranch and has gone to their parties. She’s sixteen and a known omega registered with USDPU.”

I scrubbed a hand down my sweaty face. “It’s got to be this Pack Rights Militia bullshit. You know Austin told me the Rileys aren’t even on the USDPU waiting list?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s... not good.”

We were silent for a moment, standing shoulder to shoulder as we watched Daisy chattering away at Austin, who was helping her load her barbell. There wasn’t much left to say as we contemplated just what a bunch of aggrieved Alpha males could have planned for underaged omega girls who’d mysteriously gone missing.

The thought turned my stomach.

“Maybe they could help us,” I murmured, my eyes still on Austin as he patiently spotted Daisy through each of her bench press reps.

Derrick scoffed. “Do you trust them yet?”

I hummed noncommittally. “We’re getting warmer, at least.”

After a few minutes, Daisy finished up and flounced away to the dumbbell racks, effectively dismissing Austin. He meandered back over to us, unflinching under the weight of Derrick’s pulsing dominance.

“Daisy’s packing some strength in those skinny arms,” Austin said as he came to a stop very much in my personal space. “Now I see how she was able to choke out an Alpha four times her size.”

“She’s resourceful,” I replied. “Don’t fuck with her.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“But you’re here fucking with Dylan,” Derrick said. “Why don’t you and the other pretty boys in your pack get back to doing your job?”

The pheromones of two very dominant Alphas posturing at each other were now thick enough to choke anyone walking by. Austin arched a brow at him. “I think you know that you and Dylan both are related to my current *job*.”

Derrick smiled in challenge. “You gonna take me in for questioning, Bryce?”

“Ugh, will you two cut it out,” I griped. “I can barely breathe right now. Look, Derrick, those horny sophomore boys are hovering around Daisy again.”

Derrick snapped his neck in Daisy’s direction like a Doberman sensing its prey. “I’ll be back.” He strode away.

I sighed, glancing at Austin, who was stifling a laugh. “Daisy would kill me—she hates it when he does that. But you two needed to chill the hell out.”

Austin shrugged, and then he stepped even closer to me. I was tall, but he was a lot taller, and I craned my neck to stare at his rugged, handsome face—unabashedly, since we no longer had a chaperone. His smile was warm and genuine as he grabbed my hand. I watched with avid fascination as he slowly unwound my bright pink hand wraps. He tossed them into my bag on the floor, then he lifted my hand to study my knuckles, rubbing a soothing thumb over them where they were a little pink from our sparring session earlier.

I stood there and let him do this because I liked it a *whole* lot.

Then I felt a dangerous clinch in my lower belly, and I pulled away before my body did something to give the game away, like leak slick in spandex shorts.

“Well, I’m headed home,” I said lightly. “Enjoy the rest of your workout.”

He frowned, but he nodded in acceptance. “This isn’t over, Firecracker. Not even a little bit.”

I believed him, and I wished it didn’t excite me as much as it worried me.

DYLAN

The next day, I had just shooed Mom away to take her lunch break, leaving me to man the store all by my lonesome, when Cameron Lowell-Bryce appeared in the entrance like one of heaven's angels descended from on high.

He'd ditched his Bryce Solutions Official Badass uniform and instead wore stylish ripped jeans and a long-sleeved shirt that hugged his defined chest and sported a designer logo that would've cost a few zeros beyond what I could fathom spending on a T-shirt. His golden hair was loose around his face, luminous despite the drab gray of the winter day outside our windows.

He made his lazy way down the wide center aisle, a sly smile on his face and those big blue eyes focused intently on me.

For a few blissful seconds, I let myself enjoy the pleasant tingles that being the center of this beautiful man's attention elicited.

Then I screwed my face into something resembling a stern look as he prowled up to my counter. "Cameron. I see it's your turn to try to shake me down."

He only smiled wider, leaning an arm on the counter to let his gaze caress my face. "Good afternoon, Dylan. I was just in the neighborhood, and I found myself missing you."

"Smooth. In case no one's ever mentioned this to you, there's really no need for you to waste energy turning on the

charm. Your face really is sufficient for anyone attracted to men.”

He let out a boisterous laugh. “That so? Somehow I doubt this face is enough to get the formidable Dylan St. James to spill all her secrets.”

That face was tempting, but my secrets were much higher stakes than the Bryce boys were really contemplating, and I’d had a lot of practice.

I arched a brow at him. “So, you admit you’re just here to interrogate me?”

“I am here to hang out with you, Blossom. That’s it.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Blossom? I wasn’t aware there was anything... *floral* about me.”

He chuckled, and then he hopped up on the counter. With a graceful spin and a slide, he deposited his large body in the stool next to me, then he waved merrily at a customer who’d stopped to peruse the greeting card rack next to the register. “Gladys, those are my grandmother’s favorite brand. She sends me one for every birthday.”

“*Oh*,” the older woman gushed as she examined the card. “Yes, these are sturdy—very high quality. Thank you, Cameron.”

“Don’t mention it.”

I gaped as she gathered a few cards before shuffling over to examine the candles. As I watched her go, Cam leaned into me, his lips nearly brushing my ear as he said, “Blossom is my favorite Powerpuff Girl. She’s the redhead, and she kicks butt.”

I blew out a shaky breath as his spicy orange flooded my senses. “*Oh*,” murmured. “I like her too. I guess you can... call me that.”

I’d already let Austin give me a damn pet name. Why not just keep the trend going?

Cam shivered the tiniest bit as he inhaled next to my ear, and then he removed himself back to his stool. For a few long

minutes, we sat in companionable peace while I rang up a few customers and he made pleasant small talk with them.

“Do you like working here?” he asked me during a lull. “Is the store your primary job?”

“Mmm, I do,” I replied as I finished typing on the computer. I spun on my stool to face him, and I found him wearing a look of genuine curiosity. “This isn’t just a job to me. My family built this store from nothing. I’m really proud of it.”

He nodded. “I can understand that. My parents are self-made... successful businesspeople.”

“You can say millionaires, Cam,” I teased. “We looked you up—your parents live in a mansion right next door to the Bryces.”

“Fine, you caught me,” he replied, grinning. “The Bryce Solutions wing of the elder Bryce Pack is also pretty self-made, as well. There’s generational wealth from Jonathan’s family, but he works more than anyone as a surgeon. Just because we all come from the Palisades doesn’t mean we don’t appreciate the value of hard work.”

I liked that, and I’d gotten the same impression of the younger Bryces. They cared about their work, as inconvenient as that was for me personally at the moment.

“You know my dad also has a security consulting business?” I asked him, then waved a dismissive hand. “Of course you do. You nosy bastards dug into all of us, I’m sure.”

He chortled. “We did. Your dad is very well-respected in the business.”

“He and Derrick are off on a site visit today,” I told him. “I work for my dad, too, on occasion. I’ve always thought I might enjoy taking his company over one day.”

Cam beamed at me. “You’re so perfect.”

My face heated—there was no stopping it. “I am not p—”

I was saved from turning into a stammering mess in reaction to a simple compliment by the arrival of another

customer at the counter.

Ryan, co-owner of our gym, good friend of Derrick's, and lone beta in that group of bros, gave me his sexiest grin as he set some cleaning supplies next to the register. "Hey, Dylan. Good to see you."

"Hi, Ryan," I replied with a friendly smile as I rang him up. "You on cleaning duty at the gym this week?"

"Sure am." He set his elbows on the counter and leaned in closer. "You're looking *real* good, Dylan. You sure I can't talk you into that date?"

Most of Derrick's friends knew better than to hit on me. My stance on sleeping with Alphas was well-known, and none of them actually wanted to add Derrick's sister to the notches in their bedpost.

Ryan was a little different as the only beta in the group. Social norms said there was a chance at a real relationship between us, but we were both aware that wasn't *really* the case. That group of guys would form a pack eventually, and Ryan would join—especially because he and Baron had a little thing going on the side.

He was definitely hot—warm brown skin, glossy black hair, muscles for days just like the rest of the guys—but he was firmly friendzone, and he knew it.

But he liked to try, anyway.

Suddenly, Cam was in my space, sliding his stool right up next to mine and pressing his warm, hard body against me. "Blossom, who's this?"

Ryan's grin slid from his face, his brown eyes narrowing at Cam. "I'm Ryan, Dylan's *very* good friend. Who the hell are you?"

I sighed. Here I sat in the presence of two *beta* men who had no biological excuses for this display, and yet it was as if I was back in the middle of the Austin-Derrick dick-measuring contest.

At least I could breathe this time.

Cam held out his hand. “I’m Cameron, and I’m also Dylan’s very good friend.”

Ryan gave his hand a perfunctory shake. “Somehow I doubt that. I haven’t seen you around, and I’ve known Dylan and Derrick for years.”

Cam blasted Ryan with his sunshine smile, but now it had a sharp edge. “You know how you can meet a person and feel like you’ve known them for years? That’s how my *pack* and I feel about Dylan.”

Ryan snorted. “Nice try, man. Dylan doesn’t fuck with *packs*.”

Cam threaded his long fingers through mine and pulled my hand into his lap. I should’ve squashed this little display of possession, but Cam’s hand felt very nice wrapped around mine.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said, his voice silky. “I think we’re growing on her.”

“All right,” I said, looking between the two of them. “I’m a grown woman, and I can have as many *friends* as I want. Ryan, I’ll catch you the next time I’m in the gym?”

He glowered at Cam one last time before he grabbed his sack of supplies and turned back to me. “Sure, Dylan. Looking forward to it.”

Unable to help himself, Cam gave him a little finger wave. “I’ll see you there, too, Ryan.”

“Great.”

We watched him turn and stride confidently out of the store, then I elbowed Cam in the ribs. “What the hell was that? You might as well have pissed a circle around me.”

He was unrepentant. “That boy wants to fuck you, Blossom. I didn’t care for it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m aware, Cameron, but he’s not serious about it. And it’s not your business, anyway.”

“Why wouldn’t he be serious about it? You’re such a catch.”

That warm feeling stirred low in my belly again.

Danger, Dylan.

I cleared my throat and went with the truth. “Ryan may be a beta, but he’ll join Kade’s pack once those guys get around to forming one. There’s no future there, and he knows I have no interest in being a fling for any of Derrick’s best friends.”

Cam studied me, still sitting close enough that our thighs touched under the counter. He lifted a hand and gently tucked a tendril of hair that had escaped my ponytail behind my ear. “No, you’re nobody’s fling. Unless that was what you wanted, of course. But, you know—” He pulled the collar of his shirt aside, again revealing the two crescent marks courtesy of Seth’s teeth. “—betas can be more than just a fling for pack.”

I caved to the urge to touch the shiny pink scar, lightly tracing my fingertip around the oval.

Cam shivered, and his eyes heated. “Seth can probably feel that, Blossom. He’ll be very jealous.”

“Oh,” I said, quickly pulling my hand away. “Sorry, I didn’t think—”

He grabbed my hand and put it right back where it had been. “No, I meant he’ll be very jealous that I got to feel your hands on me. You’re welcome to touch me—or him—whenever you want.”

My deviant mind conjured up all kinds of *touching scenarios* featuring the two of them in substantially less clothing, but the fantasy was fast extinguished as I registered the pungent scent of an approaching customer.

I tensed, scrambling to put a stopper on the rage that exploded inside me. Cam sensed the change in me and was on his guard immediately, turning to face our new customer with a look that said he was assessing a threat.

Jesse Riley swaggered up to the counter clad in his varsity letterman jacket, dusty jeans, and cowboy boots. Leaner than

his brother, he was still over six feet tall with the build of a high-school football player. His shaggy blond hair was windswept, and he smelled like a gym sock in a pine forest.

“Jesse,” I said between clenched teeth. “Fancy seeing you in my store in the middle of a school day.”

“I ditched,” he said blithely. “I want my fucking tablet back, you sneaky bitch. Tad said it was a chick who broke into our house, and we all know you’re an uppity pack-hating whore with a family who likes to stick their noses where they don’t fucking belong. We know it was you.”

Well, that was a diatribe Jones Riley would’ve been proud of. The apple didn’t fall far with either of these dickheads.

Cam was eerily still next to me. Not a chance a hotheaded teenage Alpha would view a beta male as a threat, but I had little doubt Cam could put the hurt on Jesse without breaking much of a sweat.

Time to de-escalate. “Tim-Tom’s name is Tad? Damn, we had that *way* wrong.”

Jesse sneered. “What the fuck are you talking about? Give me back my tablet and anything else you stole from us, and *maybe* my pack won’t burn this shitty store down with you all inside.”

“Dylan,” Cam said, calm as could be. “Who is this stinky baby Alpha, and why does he have a death wish?”

Jesse’s head snapped to Cam. “You wanna go, pretty boy?”

“That’s Jesse Riley,” I told Cam. “He’s under the mistaken notion that I’ve stolen something from him.”

Cam knew good and well that I had almost certainly stolen something from Jesse, but he raised his blond brows like he was shocked at the accusation.

“I see,” Cam replied. “Those teenage Alphas do tend to fly off the handle. Takes a while to get a good grasp on those raging hormones. The confusion is normal.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Jesse barked. It was a baby Alpha bark, and it was useless against a bonded beta and a secret

omega who'd snuffed out her body's natural responses to that bullshit. "You two should watch how you speak to an Alpha. I should teach you both a lesson right here in front of your customers."

I lost the battle with my seething anger, and I jumped to my feet and leaned over the counter, bracing my palms against the cold marble. "Where is she, Jesse? What did you do with her?"

It was his turn to play dumb. "Where is who?" he asked, smirking. "Don't have a fucking clue who you're taking about."

"If you've hurt her," I growled, "I will rip your balls from your body."

"Try it, beta cunt. I'll make you choke on my cock for your trouble."

Now Cam was on his feet and pressed to my side in support. "Dylan, may I please strangle him and then hang him from the rafters as a warning to his shithead friends about what happens when *anyone* speaks to you the way this slimy little asshole has?"

Jesse puffed up his chest, his cloying scent pumping into the air around us. "Come on then, pussy boy. I'll show you how a *real* man fucking fights."

"That's quite enough."

Mom strode from the staff hallway, her rifle slung casually over her shoulder like it was her purse. "Mr. Riley, I'd suggest you be on your way before I call the school and report your absence. We don't take kindly to our customers harassing our staff."

Jesse deflated before crossing his arms over his chest, scoffing. "Sure, whatever. I can see we're going to have to do this the hard way."

He turned without another word and stalked out. I held my breath until the jingle of the bell over the entry door announced his exit from the building.

Mom watched him go, frowning, then she turned to Cam and me. “You two okay?”

“Yes,” I said as I collapsed back onto my stool. “Ugh, I should’ve let Cam string him up so we could torture some answers out of him.”

“Honey, I know that’s very tempting, but it would cause us a whole hell of a lot of trouble.”

“Party pooper.”

Cam was taking this all in with an inquisitive stare when my mom turned to him. Her face brightened—he did tend to have that effect. “Oh, this is Cameron?”

Cam’s charming smile returned. He held out a hand, and Mom took it with a pleased grin. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. St. James. I’m Dylan’s friend, Cameron Lowell-Bryce.”

“Oh my, you are pretty,” she gushed. “Dylan, he’s *so* pretty.”

“I have eyes, Mom.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Cam said to her. “You are so very gorgeous yourself. Mr. St. James is a lucky Alpha.”

She let out a girlish giggle. “Oh, you stop that.”

“I’m not sure what that was all about, but I’m just glad I could be here for Dylan when that little jerk came in to run his nasty mouth at her. Though I know she can handle herself.”

Mom beamed at him. “That she can, but I’m glad you were here too. Dylan needs more friends who have her back.”

“*Mom.*” She was about four seconds away from gift wrapping me for my *pack*.

Cam’s eyes twinkled. “I would love to be that friend.” He moved his sparkling blue gaze to me. “Dylan, when your other *friends*, Seth and Austin, and I track down that little shithead and beat some sense into him, what other information can I assist you in extracting?”

Mom chuckled, and I shot her a look that screamed *you’re not helping*, then I turned back to Cam. I was instantly caught

in his beatific, mischievous grin. “Nice try. I told you our beef with the Rileys isn’t the business of Bryce Solutions.”

“Make it our business, Blossom.”

“Nope. Don’t you have paying clients and a case to close?”

“Dylan.”

“Cameron.”

He sighed, frustration tugging at his smile. “*We care*, Dylan. I hope someday we can prove that to you.”

A loud buzzing against the countertop interrupted us. Cam picked up his phone and examined his message.

“Looks like it’s time for a team meeting,” he said, shoving his phone into the pocket of his jeans. His lower lip formed a painfully adorable pout. “So, I have to go.”

“It was nice to meet you, Cameron,” Mom said warmly. She handed me her rifle to stow for her, then she turned to face the store floor. “I have some restocking to do. I’m sure I’ll see you again soon.”

“Absolutely,” he replied.

She wandered away. I stood up from my stool, brushing past Cam to shelve Mom’s rifle in its place under the far side of the counter. When I turned back to face Cam, I found him stepping right into my space. He reached for my hand as he stared into my eyes with an intensity that rivaled Austin’s. “Please be safe, Blossom,” he whispered.

I squeezed his hand. “I will, Cam. My family is tough. Don’t worry about us.”

He cupped the back of my head, and then he leaned in to press a kiss to my temple. “See you soon.”

Then he vaulted over the counter and landed lightly on the cement floor. I watched as he ambled away and out the door, taking the tiny piece of my heart he’d managed to chip away with him as he went.

DYLAN

I'd thought I wasn't due my next visit from a member of the Bryce Pack until tomorrow, but when someone buzzed at the back entrance to the store just as I'd settled in for a little after-dinner TV binge, I knew I'd thought wrong.

Daisy dropped her video game controller and bounded to the door. She pressed the button on our security camera, and the tiny screen revealed our visitor.

Seth stood at the store's back door, waiting patiently. We parked our cars behind the building, so Dad had designed the back entrance to open right in front of the staircase that led to our living quarters.

"What's up, Seth B?" Daisy said into the speaker. "Here to visit Dylan?"

"Yes, ma'am," came his reply. "Can you buzz me up?"

"Daisy," Derrick growled from where he was sprawled in the corner of our large sectional couch like a lazy king. "Don't let him up here."

She arched a brow at him. "What, so you can bang your way through the female population of Merchant Village, but Dylan isn't allowed one gentleman caller?"

"Daisy—"

She smashed the button, and the loud beep announced Seth's entrance into the building.

I groaned, tossing my tablet onto the couch cushion next to me. Shoving aside the warm blanket I'd been very comfortably burrowed under, I got to my feet and yanked my oversized sweatshirt down my thighs. I shoved my feet into the fuzzy slippers I'd left next to the couch, then trudged to the door.

Looking pleased with herself, Daisy skipped back into the living room, grabbed her controller, and stole my blanket.

As a knock sounded at the door to our apartment, I pulled it open.

There was Seth, illuminated by the soft light of the stairwell in all his tattooed glory. He'd stuck his hands in the pockets of his tight black jeans, the intricate floral designs inked onto his skin just visible over the top of his pockets. He wore a dark gray dress shirt with the collar unbuttoned enough to tease a peek at his colorful chest, and he'd tamed the unruly top of his chocolate-brown hair into something stylish. The thin silver hoop around his right nostril winked under the lights.

Seth in his work uniform screamed danger.

Seth dressed for the club screamed sex.

"Hey, love," he said as he dragged his dark gaze from my face, down my bare legs, and back up again. His sugary cinnamon scent surged, saturating the small space around us. "As good as you look just like that, I need you to change. We're going out."

I'd like to say I was now a pro and unaffected by the heavy caress of Bryce Pack scent and pheromones, but it took everything I had not to sag into the doorframe like a wilting maiden. "Out? I'm spending the evening *out* of my bedroom on the couch, watching a K-drama, Seth."

"Seth B!" Daisy shouted from behind me. "Come race Mario Kart with me!"

He shot me a triumphant smile before he moseyed past me, grabbing my hand and dragging me behind him into our living

room. He caught the controller Daisy tossed at him in his free hand, then he dropped onto an open couch cushion.

He released my hand and patted me lightly on the butt. “Go get ready, sweetheart.”

Derrick eyed him with deep suspicion. “What the fuck is this? A date?”

Seth grinned, shrugging one brawny shoulder. “Not unless she wants it to be. My packmates have gotten to hang out with her, and now it’s my turn. It’s only fair.”

“Dylan does not *date* Alphas.”

I huffed. “Will you two stop talking about me like I’m not standing right here?”

“Seth!” Daisy barked from her beanbag chair on the floor. “Pay attention! The race is starting.”

He chuckled, flopping back on the couch and shifting his focus to the TV screen. “I’m ready, Daisy. I’m good for one cup race and then Dylan and I are gonna head out.”

“You’re so sure,” I told him. “I haven’t said yes to this not-date-which-is-actually-a-third-attempt-to-interrogate-me.”

Seth mashed his tattooed fingers on the controller as he raced his Kart around some snowy mountains. “Would you rather me not-date-interrogate you here while Derrick tries to murder me with his eyes and then it inevitably devolves into a cloying dominance battle?”

That got a half-hearted laugh out of Derrick. “He’s right. How about I just come along to chaperone this not-date? Bryce and I can behave in public. Probably.”

Daisy jammed the pause button on their race, and she whirled to face Derrick with a look of profound hurt on her face. “You promised you would stay in and play the Switch with me tonight.”

Derrick lost his bravado, his face softening as he looked at Daisy. “I did. You’re right.”

She grinned happily, then turned back to unpause the game.

“Cool, that settles it,” Seth said, then he pumped his fist in victory as he blasted a competitor Kart with a red shell. “Dylan, go put on something that’ll make the girls at the Javelina jealous as fuck.”

I snorted. “I could wear a garbage bag and those bitches would still be jealous as fuck if I walk in there with *you*.”

Seth preened while Derrick’s scoff reverberated around the room.

Daisy turned to shoot one more glare at Derrick. “You’re definitely not going skank hunting at the Javelina tonight.”

He raised his hands in surrender. “I’m not. I said I’d play video games with you, and I will—as soon as this asshole gives up his controller.”

“Maybe if you were doing what you’d promised Daisy, she wouldn’t have needed to invite me to play.”

“How about you mind your own goddamned business?”

I sighed and slunk off to my room, leaving them to bicker. The Blue Javelina bar wasn’t really my scene, but Derrick would drag me there occasionally and force me to be social. Going there with Seth was not the greatest idea, but I’d withstood Austin’s and Cam’s attempts to weasel information out of me and had no reason to think Seth would be any different.

And, as it turned out, I’d enjoyed spending time with the two of them, and the idea of spending time with Seth also appealed to me, the dangerous line I was walking be damned.

I’d asked Derrick and Daisy to sniff-test me earlier after Feddy had informed me that he had no news. My normal light, almost bitter coffee scent had gained an edge of sweetness, but I was still firmly signaling beta.

In a few weeks, the story might be a lot different, but I couldn’t do anything about it right now.

I also couldn't do anything else to find Mary Rose or Lily Linnartz until Derrick snuck into the PRM meeting tomorrow night.

Seth was going to hang around no matter what, so it may as well be in a crowded bar where it was easier to distract him from what he'd come for.

Decision made, I rifled through my tiny closet for something appropriate for the chilly weather but also cute enough that Seth wouldn't feel embarrassed to be seen with me.

Ten minutes later, I decided that no matter what happened tonight, it would all have been worth it to have Seth look at me the way he did when I emerged from my room dressed and ready for our night out.

His eyes widened as he caught sight of me, and he ceased snickering at whatever Daisy had just said that had even relaxed Derrick enough to laugh in Seth's presence.

The flush warmed my cheeks as he took me in with heat in his dark gaze. I hadn't dressed particularly fancy—or slutty—but it appeared my minimal efforts had done the trick. I wore a vintage band T-shirt loosely tucked into a faded denim skirt I'd stolen from my mom's box of clothes she'd worn in the nineties. The skirt was short, so my longish legs were on display and clad only in sheer black tights to stave off the brisk wind outside. I had my black cowgirl boots on, feeling confident I could crush a handsy Alpha's nuts under them if the situation called for it.

I'd put on a little makeup—I rarely wore any, so that would be a change for Seth—and I managed to dry shampoo and fluff my hair into something not totally terrible.

“Damn, Dylan,” Daisy snarked. “Seth'll be too busy keeping other dudes off you to interrogate you. Good thinking.”

Seth rose and stalked the few feet across our living room rug he needed to reach me, a silent killer even in his heavy boots. He grabbed my hand and pulled it to his lips, and he

kept his eyes on mine as he pressed a kiss to the inside of my wrist, taking a quiet drag of my scent. “Dylan, you look amazing.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. “You look outrageously good, but you knew that.”

“I do now that I have *you* on my arm.”

It was heady, having this kind of attention from an Alpha as gorgeous as Seth. It wasn't abnormal for a beta to catch the eye of an Alpha, but it was usually as someone they might like to spend a night or two with. It could be genuine, but it was always fleeting, and for my part, I'd never entertained it at all because of who I was and what I was hiding.

Seth made me feel like I was the woman of his dreams with just a look. Like I wasn't someone to pass the time with until his pack bonded their perfect omega. Like I was Dylan, he was Seth, and together we could have the world.

It was a dangerous feeling, a power he could certainly use to his advantage, and he didn't even know the half of what he could *really* do to me.

I needed to get my head on straight, and quickly.

Seth pulled me under his arm and raised his phone, snapping a picture of us together. “The guys are gonna be so jealous. I was pissed I was the last to get to see you, but it was worth the fucking wait.”

I elbowed him. “Careful, Seth. You make it sound like the fabled Bryce Pack is *courting* a beta with an online degree who works in a hardware store.”

That knocked the wind from his sails. His sexy smirk fell away, and he sighed. “You have no idea how much I wish that was true, Dylan.”

His words stung in a bittersweet sort of way. I had no interest in being anyone's fucking kept omega, not even my scent-matched mates', but I'd just been living in my precious little fantasy where Seth wanted me for who I was as a person.

Not for the treasured omega biology he and his pack would be seeking for anything other than a fling.

It appeared Seth had needed the reminder of what he was supposed to be *seeking*, and it wasn't Dylan the beta from the hardware store.

And I'd needed the reminder that they'd never choose me—not as the me I wanted to be.

Seth, oblivious to the dark turn my thoughts had just taken, shook off our momentary downer. “We’re going to have fun tonight, okay, love? Let’s get moving.” He threaded his fingers through mine and began to pull me toward the door.

“If you say so,” I replied lightly, following him like the dutiful omega I’d never be.

I met Derrick’s concerned stare as we went. I was walking a perilous line—on several fronts—and we both knew it, but Derrick also trusted me to handle myself.

Despite all the posturing and growling, he’d assessed the Bryces as about as safe for me to be around as was possible for an Alpha pack.

“*Are you sure?*” he mouthed.

I shrugged helplessly. “*I’ll be okay,*” I mouthed back.

Seth shot Derrick a taunting grin. “I’ll have her home by curfew, Dad.”

Derrick grunted. “Hilarious.”

We stopped by the door, and I pulled on the oversized flannel shirt I wore as a jacket. I waved to my brother and Daisy, then I followed Seth out, my hand still firmly linked with his.



THE BLUE JAVELINA bar was only one of many late-night drinking establishments scattered around Merchant Village, but it was the place that catered most to the younger crowd with its commitment to folksy live music, trendy cocktails, and

“small plates” that pretended to be classier than your average bar food.

The stares hit us as soon as Seth and I breezed through the doors, still holding hands. A cursory glance around the room pegged a lot of familiar faces—people I’d gone to high school with or otherwise encountered in the neighborhood. I nodded at Kade and Baron, who were shooting pool in the large alcove just to the right of the entryway while a gaggle of beta girls in tiny dresses hovered nearby.

Kade’s blond eyebrows hit his hairline as he noticed I was on the arm of a big, gorgeous Alpha, then he gave me a smirk, like he’d just *known* I’d cave eventually.

Just another beta girl wanting to take that legendary Alpha cock for a ride.

He got my middle finger in return. Seth chuckled in my ear and gave Kade his own wave, reminding me that the Bryce Pack had already ingratiated themselves with Derrick’s friends by bringing their dollars to the gym.

We made our way to the bar. The turquoise-patterned Spanish tile that decorated its front glowed an electric blue under the neon lighting mounted beneath the bar top. The husky voice of tonight’s featured musician was just loud enough to force us to lean right into each other’s faces if we wanted our words to be heard.

In a room full of a mishmash of scents and pheromones, Seth was the only thing I registered. Cedar and cinnamon rolls and sex and *male*.

As the bartender slid the drinks I’d ordered in front of us, Seth wrapped a big hand casually around my hip and got down to business. “Sweetheart, I’m only going to ask this once. I’m not going to beg, but I would love nothing more than to cross this shit off the list, put our investigation behind us, and have a fucking enjoyable evening with you. I’ve been almost... desperate to see you again. It’s kind of alarming, actually, and Cam has been a smug little bastard about it.”

I sipped my drink and eyed him over the rim, pretending the flattery had bounced right off me instead of enveloping my body like a warm bath. “Okay, then, Bryce. Do your worst.”

SETH

In a perfect world, Dylan St. James would've been the woman of my dreams. Sexy as fuck, those big hazel eyes sparkling with mischief as she remained so stubbornly immune to my wiles. It was my first time seeing her with her dark red hair worn down, and it looked so smooth and silky. I wanted to run my fingers through it more than I'd wanted anything, ever.

Dylan didn't give two shits who I was—not just an Alpha, but a Bryce Alpha. Didn't phase her in the slightest. Didn't have her seeking my attention. Never in my life had I needed to weasel my way into a girl's home and practically coerce her into going out with me.

And not only was my bonded beta as into her as I was, it appeared my unflappable big brother was, as well.

Conditioned all my life to covet the sweet, soft omega female that needed nothing more than my protection and care, it'd almost knocked me on my ass when I'd gotten half a boner watching Dylan leap from the darkness at an Alpha, wrench a rifle from his hands, and then smash the butt of a handgun into his face.

And it was probably my imagination, but her subtle beta scent was even more delicious than it'd been the last time I'd been lucky enough to get close enough to catch a sniff. Creamy coffee dessert, like someone was waving tiramisu under my nose but not letting me get a taste.

But goddamn it, she was a vault. She'd shown us exactly what she'd wanted to show us and nothing more, and I was doubtful anything we did would change that.

Still, I wanted to know her every secret.

I wanted to know that Sally Brown truly was safe and how the fuck Dylan and her family got involved with the Browns in the first place.

I wanted to know that *Dylan* was safe after what Cam told us had happened with the shitty little Riley Alpha.

And fuck did I want to kiss those pretty pink lips and sink my cock inside her as far as she could take me—preferably while Cam watched and stroked her hair and told her she was a very good girl.

I shook off *that* enticing thought. Business first. “Okay then, love,” I said in response to her challenge. “Do you believe me—and Austin and Cam—when we say that we want no further harm to come to Sally Brown?”

“Do you believe me when I say that if I had information that I thought you, Austin, and Cam needed to know, that I would tell you?” she countered.

“We do need to close this case, Dylan.”

She studied me, leaning into where I'd been absently stroking my thumb along the soft denim at her hip, probably not even realizing she was doing it. “Now, I'm not an *expert* investigator like you are,” she began in a low voice, “but if it were me, I bet that if I'd gathered enough evidence that my clients were... mistreating my missing omega and that she very well may have left voluntarily, I could make a convincing argument to my boss that this was the only information I needed to *drop* the case. You work for the pack, not the lost omega, and perhaps Bryce Solutions might find it's against its ethical standards to take work from abusive sleazebags.”

Loved that she'd pulled our backup plan—which was going to impress our dads not one iota—right out of thin air. I'd have pressed her on how she could possibly guess we'd found hints of just such evidence at the Browns', but I was

aware Austin had tried to gain her trust by slipping that little nugget to her already.

I moved even closer, brushing my lips against her ear. “It sounds to me like you, Dylan, might just have the mind of an *expert* investigator after all. A unique skill for a girl who supposedly works at a hardware store.”

“I’m multitalented,” she replied, her voice husky.

Before my dirty mind could gin up the innuendo to follow that statement, a girl barged into our blissful little huddle.

“Dylan, omigod!”

Dylan blew out an annoyed breath. “Hello, Kylie.”

Kylie swatted Dylan playfully on the arm. “What are you doing here? You never come out! And you brought us this....” She dragged her heavy-lidded gaze up and down my body. “*Gorgeous* Alpha specimen. You! Of all people.”

“I did not bring *you* anything,” Dylan replied, suddenly grumpy.

I stuck my hand out. “Seth Bryce. Nice to meet you, Kylie.”

She grasped my hand eagerly and hit me with some obvious *fuck me* eyes. There was no denying she was pretty—long golden-brown hair curled to perfection, big green eyes, cute nose. She wasn’t as tall as Dylan, had the type of voluptuous curves my Alpha hindbrain was programmed to crave in a woman, and smelled pleasantly sweet—likely wearing one of the perfumes formulated for betas that would enhance their natural, subdued scent. If she was one of the girls that hung out here with hopes of being picked up by unattached Alphas like Derrick and his buddies, I suspected she had a lot of success.

I wanted her to go away.

“Seth,” she whispered, breathy and coy. “It is so nice to meet you. Are you one of Derrick’s friends? I haven’t seen you here before.”

“I’m one of Dylan’s friends, actually,” I replied with a slick smile. I didn’t love that this girl was now ignoring Dylan’s presence.

Kylie crunched her brows together, pasting a confused look on her face. “You are? Dylan doesn’t... *hang out* with Alphas. And she *definitely* thinks she’s above dating them.”

Dylan snorted. “Is that what you’re calling your nightly activities, Kylie? *Dating?*”

Kylie stuck her little nose in the air. “Not all Alphas are pack bound and waiting for an omega. I also like to have fun and can sleep with whomever I please. Not all of us have a massive stick up our ass and a stupid prejudice against Alphas like *you* do, Dylan.”

This wasn’t the first time I was hearing of Dylan’s supposed aversion to Alphas. Not all betas wanted to bang an Alpha for the fun of it or in some kind of expiration-dating situation, but plenty did, and almost all Alphas took advantage of it unless they met and bonded their omega at a young age.

I’d fucked my fair share of beta women—mostly with Cam after he and I became an item because we were both too bisexual for our own good—and I’d always done my best to ensure none of them ever felt disrespected or used.

It was just the way of things, and all parties understood that.

There was no denying the pang of disappointment I felt knowing that Dylan wouldn’t be interested in me like that, but I also couldn’t imagine a one-and-done situation with her if I tried.

The issues surrounding that were... a future-Seth problem.

“Not sure where you got the idea I’m prejudiced, Kylie, since I live with two Alphas,” Dylan pointed out, sounding bored as she sipped her drink. She’d stepped out of my hold as soon as we’d been interrupted, almost like she expected me to entertain Kylie’s attention.

Kylie waved a dismissive hand. “You know what I meant.” She turned to me, sucking her lower lip into her mouth as she

looked me over once more. “She doesn’t *fuck* Alphas, Seth. She’s wasting your time. I won’t.”

I wrapped my hand around Dylan’s hip again and pulled her into my side. She let out a little squawk, but she came willingly. I stared at Kylie as I began to rub my thumb in soothing circles against Dylan’s denim-covered skin again. “I’m not here with Dylan because I’m trying to fuck her—though I should be so lucky. I’m here because I enjoy spending time with her. My older brother, Austin, feels the same way about her, and so does my *bonded* beta, Cameron. We’re all big Dylan fans. She’s a very interesting girl. So... enigmatic, wouldn’t you agree?”

Dylan let out a pleased hum—imperceptible under the music and the volume of the crowd, but I felt the tiny vibration of her body under my hand.

You better believe I meant it all, sweetheart.

Kylie gaped at me. “What... what does an Alpha—”

“Two Alphas and a very sexy beta,” I corrected.

“—want with *her*? Her whole *family* is anti-pack!”

I’d heard that one, too, and I was curious as to the reason behind it. Not all Alphas followed the biological urge to pack up and bond an omega, but it was still far from the norm.

I shrugged. “We’re growing on the St. Jameses. Derrick and I even had a civil conversation earlier tonight.”

“Kylie,” Dylan said, snapping her fingers in front of Kylie’s face to break her attention from me. “Go away. You’ve been a cunt to me since junior year when I refused to set you up with my brother. I have nothing to say to you, and it appears Seth doesn’t either. Go wave your tits at Baron—I bet your number’s up soon in his rotation anyway.”

“Ugh, you are such a *bitch*,” Kylie snapped. She turned and stalked away, shockingly agile on her towering heels.

We watched her stomp off in silence, my arm still slung casually around Dylan’s waist.

“Sorry about that,” she said after a minute. “The girls are thirsty.”

I turned to her. “I don’t like how she talked to you. I don’t like what Cameron told me about that Riley kid and how he talked to you either.”

She shrugged. “I’m used to it, Seth. Kylie acted like that because you’re the hottest man of *any* designation in this room, and she was jealous. I provoked the Rileys, and you know it. I can take care of myself, just like I have been for years, and my family has my back.”

I lost my battle for restraint. I combed my fingers through her luscious hair, sweeping one side out of her face, and then I dipped to press a firm kiss to her forehead. “I want to have your back, too, sweetheart. I know we just met, but I feel this connection with you. I want to spar with you at your gym. I want to play video games and watch bad TV in your homey little apartment. I want to take you to the range and challenge you to a sharpshooting competition.”

She smiled at that. “I’d kick your ass.”

“I believe you,” I replied seriously. “I know you have reservations about Alphas, love, and I won’t push you—none of us will—but right now, I’d like nothing more in this world than for you to dance with me.”

She stared at me, her pretty lips parted and her nostrils flaring at what I was sure was the pulse of my pheromones—my body sitting its target and ready to conquer. Unfortunately, as a beta, Dylan might scent something enticing, but she wouldn’t feel an overwhelming biological response.

At least... not for *that* reason.

“Okay,” she said finally. “Just... a couple of songs.”

Excitement zipped through me. “Whatever you want. You’re in charge.”

I threaded my fingers through hers and hauled her away from the bar, shouldering dudes out of the way as I carved a path to the dance floor. It was perfect timing, too, because the folksy singer performing tonight was between sets, and the bar

pumped upbeat club music through the speakers during the breaks.

When I was satisfied I'd found a spot with sufficient space—no one was going to touch Dylan except for me—I pulled her into my body, her back to my front, and I wrapped my hands around her hips a respectful distance above where I really wanted them.

She relaxed under my touch and began to move, her hips swaying to the sultry beat. I rocked with her, marveling at how her body fit perfectly into mine. Dylan was a tall girl, but I was a solid six inches taller, and I loved that I didn't have to hunch over to touch all the parts of her I wanted to touch while still being able to feel strong and protective around her.

Dylan doesn't need or want a protector, a rational voice said in my head.

Shut the fuck up and let me live in this fantasy, I told it.

As the song went on, I bent to press my nose into the crook of her neck, huffing that decadent scent like an addict. She shivered in my grasp, and then she threw an arm around my neck to bring me in tighter.

“Fuck, sweetheart,” I growled against her skin. “You're so sexy, and you smell fucking *amazing*.”

She tensed, and my heart skipped. *Fuck fuck fuck, I freaked her out already*.

But then she spun to face me, tossing her arms around my neck. She held my gaze, the soft yellow lighting over the dance floor catching the golden flecks in her hazel eyes, and we began to move again.

We danced another song, our stares rarely straying from each other's faces except for the time I had to growl and bark at another Alpha asking to cut in. Heat simmered under my skin, my body begging for more with this gorgeous woman.

Lock it up, Bryce.

The second time I tore my gaze from Dylan's face was when a tiny thrill sparked through my bond with Cam,

followed by a heavy blast of pure lust.

“Excuse me, but is this spot taken?” Cam purred as he slinked up behind Dylan. He looked sexy as usual in his fitted jeans and tight V-neck shirt that teased a peek at my bond mark, his silky golden hair styled to perfection and flowing around his striking face.

Dylan let out a little gasp at his arrival. “Cam!”

I gave him a stern look over her shoulder that I was sure reeked of amusement. “Couldn’t let me have my time with our girl, babe?”

His bright grin held no apology. “Don’t tease me with a sexy selfie of you both if you don’t want me to think you were trying to lure me here. I had to bribe Austin with a promise to do all our paperwork for the next two assignments to get him to let me leave without him.”

I snorted. “You will regret that.”

He plastered his body to Dylan’s back and nuzzled right into her cheek. “Somehow I doubt it.”

“This is unfair,” Dylan moaned as we began to dance with her pressed between us. “We’re supposed to be keeping this *friendly*, Seth. We made a whole deal in front of fucking Kylie about how none of this was about sex, but come on. Who in their right mind would look at the both of you together and believe any mere mortal had the power to resist?”

“Mmm, not many have tried to resist,” Cam said against her ear. “Are you imagining what Sethy and I could do to a girl together, Blossom?”

“Yes,” she griped. “You guys... share women?”

I chuckled. “It’s been a while, but yes, love. We do.”

She shut her eyes and groaned like she was in pain. “Stop it.”

Cam’s smile was effervescent. “No. I like the idea of you fantasizing about us. It’s the best thing ever.”

She opened one eye to peek up at me. “Does, uh... Austin also join?”

Cam hummed against her hair, his smug satisfaction dancing in our bond.

I grinned down at her, the question turning me on almost as much as the thought of fucking her with Cam. “Austin has not joined Cam and me *yet*, but if you must know, before Cam and I were together, Austin and I might’ve... shared a couple of times.”

Another groan. “Okay, that’s enough talking, you two. A few more songs, then I’m calling it a night.”

I laughed, meeting Cam’s fiery gaze over her shoulder as we began to move again in earnest. He was giddy, like a woman being hot for the two of us was something new and amazing.

It wasn’t, but this was Dylan. She was so closed off, and her stance on... relations with Alphas had been made clear to us. Confirmation that she *was* sexually attracted to all three of us felt like a thrilling victory.

She relaxed between Cam and me, her movements sultry and fluid, and I felt the stares of almost everyone in the room. We made a pretty picture, the three of us, and I knew the men in the room were just as jealous of Cam and me for having Dylan in our arms as the women were of her having both of our undivided attention.

Several long, hot minutes passed, and the simmer under my skin became scorching, intensified by Cam’s similar feelings of longing and lust pulsing through our bond. He met my stare again, and he smirked, leaning in at the same time I did.

Our lips clashed over Dylan’s shoulder, my tongue tangling with his in a filthy kiss. Dylan sucked in a breath, and her body vibrated with a guttural moan. It only spurred Cam on as he unleashed his own moan against my mouth, and I devoured it hungrily even as I pulled Dylan tighter against me.

When we finally broke apart, I was breathing hard. My cock was rock solid in my jeans, my knot beginning to inflate at Cam's presence, and I knew Dylan could feel it against her hip. I was certain Cam was in the same state, delirious with lust as he began to drop little exploratory kisses along Dylan's neck.

She arched for him, her pupils blown wide, her chest heaving as she took big, panting breaths. Chocolate and coffee enveloped me.

I cupped her cheek, snaring her wide-eyed gaze and holding onto it for dear life. "Dylan," I rasped. "Love, can we go—"

It was like someone cut a string. The sexual tension that had her wound as tight as it did Cam and me vanished, and she shook her head violently before extricating herself from our hold in one swift maneuver.

"No, Seth. Cam, I... no. I'm sorry."

Cam and I stepped back together, giving her the space she needed, and my heart broke at the almost *frightened* look on her face. "Dylan, I'm sorry if we pushed too hard, we just—"

"I don't fuck Alphas, Seth. That's a true thing about me." She looked at Cam, an apology in her hardened stare. "That includes you, too, Cameron. You're bonded to one, and I know you're a package deal."

"Blossom, we'd never pressure you—"

"I know that. But this can't... this can't be a thing. Us. Whatever the fuck it is, because I don't know."

I didn't know, either, if I was being honest, but I was so fucking desperate for her that I hadn't cared.

"Sweetheart, I... Cam and I don't see you as just another beta girl to fuck and forget. I don't want you to think that."

She took one more step away from us, and my heart sank. "But ultimately... how could I be anything but?"

"Fuck," I swore at the ceiling. The problem was that she was right, and I hated it.

Cam's dejection sank into our bond, heavy and cold. "Dylan, please just... give us some time. Don't assume anything. Get to know our pack?"

She shook her head, and she looked as sad as I felt. "I am. I have. You guys are... kind of wonderful. But you're still a *pack*."

Then she turned and slipped away into the mass of bodies on the dance floor like the thief in the night I knew her to be.

I wanted to go after her, but it would only make things worse.

Needing to stay rooted where I was, I threw my arms around Cam and squeezed him in a tight hug. "I'm sorry, babe. I fucked that up."

"We both did," he said into my neck. "But I'm not giving up. Not yet. I want to see where this... goes."

I felt the same way, choosing to ignore my head and throw my hat firmly in with my heart—and my cock. "Me too."

AUSTIN

“The place reeks of sour fucking Alpha bullshit.”

Seth was right, and his sullen mood wasn't helping the situation. We stood in the large patio space of a bar and grill called Manny's, where Seth had determined via his lurking in the local Pack Rights Militia Discord server that a rally was happening this evening. It was cold, and an earlier rain had dampened everything just enough to have me feeling the chill down to my bones.

The place was brimming with young Alpha men, the air around us viscous with the sheer volume of pheromones as groups peacocked for one another and drank excessively. The crowd was mostly dressed down and decidedly working-class, but a few clusters of pressed chinos and trench coats told me that the PRM bullshit had penetrated all socio-economic levels in the city.

“It does reek,” I agreed. “And your attitude is making it even more sour in our immediate vicinity.”

He kicked at the crushed gravel under our feet. “You weren't there, man. Dylan freaked the hell out. I just hope she'll see us again.”

“She will,” Cam said in our ears. We wore microscopic earpieces connecting us to him where he was hunkered down in an unmarked Bryce Solutions van a few blocks away. “My Blossom is fond of us. We're *all* just a little... unsure what to do with these feelings we're having.”

Understatement, but we needed to file it under “shit to tackle later” because we were here to figure out what the hell the Pack Rights Militia was about. If the Browns were tied up in something that promoted omega abuse, we were going to take that to our dads, along with what we’d found at their house, and insist we return their fee. It was clear that trying to needle Dylan for information wasn’t going to bear fruit, and I wanted this case off my desk.

So, instead of reminiscing about how I’d been so turned on when wrestling with Dylan on the mat at the gym that I’d thought I felt my *knot* give a little pulse—a thing that did not happen for an Alpha without an omega or a bonded partner—I would stand here, dressed in an old sweatshirt and baseball cap, pretending to sip my beer while we waited for this meeting to start.

“You two new?”

A stocky male stopped in front of Seth and me to eye us up and down. He couldn’t have been older than twenty, and he wore a football jersey over a sweatshirt and had a high-and-tight crew cut. I held his stare with a flat, bored look, and I pulsed dominance hard to make a point. He winced and took the appropriate two steps backward.

“Yeah, man,” Seth replied in a lazy drawl. “I got to talkin’ with a guy in a bar a few weeks ago, and he said I seemed... like-minded, so he suggested I come out to the meeting tonight.” He hooked a thumb in my direction. “Brought my brother.”

Crew Cut grunted. “Gotcha. Well, you’re comin’ in right when things are about to start really fuckin’ happening, and it’s about goddam time. Omega bitches have gotten so fucking uppity, like it isn’t their only job to shut the fuck up, take a knot, and say, ‘Please sir, may I have another.’”

“Lovely,” Cam said in our ears.

“Uh-huh,” Seth replied, forcing a smile at the guy. “I’m pretty excited to hear about these... things that are happening.”

Crew Cut smirked. “We aren’t men who’ve forgotten how to be Alphas. We’re the top of the food chain, man, which means we take what’s ours.”

He wandered back to the bar, pausing to high-five some other meatheads that must have been his pack.

“I didn’t love the sound of that,” I mused as Seth and I began to move closer to the small stage where there would normally be live music.

“Yeah, that’s the vibe I was getting from the server,” he replied. “But no one was forthcoming with any sort of actual actions being taken by PRM. Just a lot of airing of grievances around the fact that omegas aren’t just falling from the sky and onto their dicks.”

I cast my gaze around the stage and the crowd below, searching for whoever was going to reveal himself as the leader of this little circle-jerk. Instead my stare slammed straight into a pair of familiar hazel eyes lurking beneath the low bill of a baseball cap and the hood of a sweatshirt.

“Derrick’s here,” I murmured to Seth.

“I see him. No way he’s here, like, for real... right?”

Derrick nodded at me, then he took a few big steps backward, revealing who had been standing just to his right near the stage.

I swore. “That’s fucking Don and Dennis from the Brown Pack.”

“Cam, sending you photos,” Seth announced in a low voice as he pulled his phone covertly from his pocket.

I caught Derrick’s gaze again. He winked, shooting me a cocky smile that said, “You’re welcome, asshole.”

“He wanted us to see the Browns,” I said. “He’s probably here doing the same thing we are. Looking for information.”

“It’s got to be those Riley assholes,” Cam replied. “I told you what Dylan said to that little shit when he ran his mouth at her. I think they’re looking for a missing girl, and the Riley Pack is their lead.”

Finally, the single light aimed at the stage flashed, and the volume of the crowd increased with excited anticipation, the claps, whistles, and cheers churning the cesspool that now crowded forward. A man climbed onto the stage, and my immediate thought was that he did not strike me as the type to be the general of a “militia” of angry, women-hating Alpha men.

He was an Alpha, certainly, but he had the look of an unassuming country boy who called his grandmother “Mee-Maw” and attended church on Sundays.

“Friends! Thank you for being here tonight!” The stage lighting flashed off the pearl snaps of his shirt as he tipped his well-worn cowboy hat at the crowd. “It is wonderful to see so many of our like-minded peers gathering together—to take a stand for the God-given rights of *real* Alpha men!”

The crowd roared.

“Y’all know me as T.R., and I’m the founder of the Pack Rights Militia,” he went on. “As you are all aware, our society has been moving in the wrong direction for decades now. Betas are taking jobs from us as our numbers dwindle. Alpha females have been elected to some of the highest offices in the nation instead of being treated like the abominations they are. More and more Alpha-male pretenders have declared themselves above pack life and are shacking up with betas. And the *government*”—he spat the word like it disgusted him—“dares to put itself between a pack and its right to bond the omega it chooses. It dares to look an Alpha male in his face and order him to *get in line*. Well, friends, to this we say, no more!”

The applause was deafening.

Seth blew out a breath. “These idiots.”

“Yeah,” I replied under my breath. “The USDPU system sure as hell isn’t perfect, but the free-for-all they seem to want would be worse.”

T.R. attempted to shush the crowd, grinning broadly. “Yes, yes! We are all aware of how females have forgotten their

place, which is to take care of the household, raise children, and serve their mates and husbands. It's no wonder this country is in a fertility crisis and has been for years! And this rot has infected our omega females, who hide behind the government and want pack after pack to dance for them like trained monkeys before they deign to *choose* us. And even then, they remain disobedient and willful after bonding."

"It is a wonder the omegas aren't flocking to this man," Cam muttered in our ears, his voice thick with sarcasm. "He seems like such a catch."

"You're getting all this, right?" I asked him.

"It's coming in loud and clear. I'm uploading it to the BS server as we speak."

I sent a look over at Dennis and Don Brown, and what I saw had my jaw grinding. They were soaking up this drivel with cocky smiles, their excited eyes gleaming, and I felt dirty from even the loose association we had with their pack by taking their money. We'd be dropping their case as soon as I could get my dad on the phone, and I didn't give a fuck if he agreed with me.

"After God created Adam, the first Alpha," T.R. continued, transitioning seamlessly into sermon mode, "He created Eve, the first omega, from his rib as a gift to him. Omega females were created from us, *for* us. The fact that we are all waiting in line for years to be *issued* an omega is a crime against God's will and an insult to Alpha males. No more!"

"No more!" the crowd shouted.

"That's right!" T.R. pumped his fist in the air. "We're working on a ... pilot program of sorts, and we'll be reaching out to a few of our members soon about participation." He paused, taking a moment to look out over the crowd. "This is an important movement, my friends. And we have allies out there trying to make real changes in government. I'd like to introduce you to one now. Please welcome mayoral candidate, Domingo Clara!"

"What the fuck?" Seth said.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Cam said at the same time.

It was a familiar name, since his campaign billboards were scattered around the city. Domingo Clara was a “traditional pack values” candidate, yes, but the guy was still a businessman with a company to run. To say I was shocked he was not only showing his face at a fringe reactionary group rally but speaking here was a gross understatement.

As polite applause sounded, Mr. Clara trotted out from behind the stage. He stood out like a sore thumb in this crowd in his expensive navy suit and polished shoes, his black hair slick with gel and his smile blinding white under the stage light. He gave T.R.’s hand a jovial shake before taking the microphone.

“Thank you, T.R., and thank you PRM for having me out tonight!”

More applause and a whistle or two. Around me, skeptical murmurs also sounded.

“I won’t take up much of your time, but I want to assure you that your concerns are not falling on deaf ears! As an Alpha and leader of my pack, it saddens me to see so many fine young males being denied their right to bond with an omega of their choosing. The government does not belong in an Alpha’s personal business. It’s unnatural, you see, and it certainly wasn’t how our fathers and grandfathers completed their packs. When they met a compatible female, they bonded her, and that was that!”

Raucous applause. Someone bellowed, “Fuckin’ right!”

“I’m here to ask for your vote in the primary election next month. With any luck, I’ll be on the ballot in November, and I pledge to you here and now that as Mayor of Ciudad del Sol, I’ll use my role as liaison with the governor to ensure that our local USDPU office appointees are... less hands-on. And I intend to see the local laws that prohibit bonding without agency approval are repealed. All change starts small, but this group is the spark we need to ensure Alpha males are returned to their rightful place in society!”

Cam's droll voice crackled in our ears again. "I'm still confused as to what else y'all require to feel like you are even more top of the food chain than you already are."

"Don't lump us in with these whiny assholes, babe," Seth replied.

"Seriously," I agreed. "Let's get the fuck out of here. I've heard enough."

Domingo Clara gave one last wave to the crowd before stepping down off the stage, and he began to shake hands with the dozens of men who lined up to speak to him. I surreptitiously panned my phone camera around one more time, sending a live feed to Cam.

I got one last shot of T.R., in deep conversation with a big Alpha with a bushy red beard, and then I moved across the crowd, looking for the Browns again.

"Stop!" Cam barked suddenly, and I froze, my phone pointed at a group of teenagers laughing with each other near the front of the stage. "That blond baby Alpha with the shaggy hair and the letterman jacket is Jesse Riley."

"The one that mouthed off to Dylan?" I asked, narrowing my eyes in his direction.

"Yes," Cam replied. "Bag him for me, will you?"

I shot a questioning look at Seth. He shrugged, glancing toward the stage to consider Jesse Riley. A maniacal grin spread slowly across his face. "I'm in. This whole investigation is fucked, anyway. Might as well shake that tree and see if we can find something out for Dylan."

I rolled my neck, getting one satisfying crack before I blew out a resigned breath. "Fine. Let's make it quick."

CAM

It was like my birthday when the back doors of the van opened and little Jesse Riley was tossed inside like a snarling sack of potatoes.

“What the fuck is this?” he shouted, rolling onto his back to take in the dimly lit van. “What the fuck do you—*you*,” he hissed as his frantic stare finally landed on me.

I lounged atop the storage bin that abutted the wall between the back of the van and the cab, paying him no mind.

“Thank you for bringing me such a nice gift,” I said to Austin and Seth as they climbed inside and shut the doors. “I hope it wasn’t too much trouble.”

“Nah, the little shit had a few too many sips of the flask he snuck into the meeting,” Seth replied, grinning as he stepped over Jesse and made his way to me. He leaned down to steal a kiss, and I hummed appreciatively against his lips.

“Fucking disgusting,” Jesse spat.

Austin growled as he stood over Jesse. Jesse winced as the force of Austin’s aggression hit him hard, scooting away until he banged into the wall of the van.

“Refrain from insulting my pack members,” Austin said, “or this little chat will get very unpleasant for you.”

“It’s already fucking unpleasant,” he snapped. “Let me out of here, or you’ll be hearing from my pack.”

I chuckled. “You’re seventeen, little man. You don’t have a pack yet.”

“My brother’s pack is gonna be my pack, same fucking difference. And who the fuck are you calling little, you pussy beta bitch?”

Austin stomped his heavy booted foot down right on top of Jesse’s ankle. “Last warning,” he barked as Jesse howled in pain.

I slithered from my perch and down to where Jesse sat hunched against the side of the van, his jaw clenched and face flushed an angry red as he cradled his ankle. I reached out to grasp his chin and jerked his gaze to mine, those all-American baby-blue eyes now narrowed into outraged little slits.

“You remember me, I take it?” I asked him, my voice a soft purr.

“Yeah. You were with that bitch Dylan St. James.”

My palm cracked against his cheek. “We do not speak about Dylan like that. That’s actually why we’re having this little chat, you and me. I didn’t appreciate how you spoke to her then either.”

Jesse must’ve decided that the two Alphas in the van had backed away enough that he no longer was obliged to sit still, and he took a swing at my head. I caught his clenched fist in my hand, rotated it, then yanked down hard on his index finger as I shoved his hand away from me.

The snap of his broken finger reverberated in the van.

“What the fuck!” he screeched.

“Are we listening now, Jesse?” I asked sweetly. “Or do we need a few more demonstrations that I’m just as dangerous as my Alphas?”

“Fuck,” he groaned. “What the fuck do you want?”

“I want to know why you were harassing a nice girl at her place of work.”

He scoffed. “Nice girl, my fucking ass. She broke into my house.”

“Where’s your evidence?” Austin asked, still looming behind me.

I bit back a smile. All three of us knew Jesse wasn’t wrong, and our evidence was our own eyeballs, since we’d witnessed Dylan in all her thieving glory.

“That family has it out for us!” Jesse shouted. “Derrick St. James is jealous of my brother because he’s a packless nobody and Jones is building something fucking awesome.”

Seth snorted behind me, and I agreed with the sentiment. Derrick was a lot of things, but “jealous” and “a nobody” were not on the list.

“Tell me, Jesse,” I said, moving to straddle his legs where they were splayed out in front of him. “Why does my Dylan think you know the whereabouts of a missing girl?”

“*Get off me,*” Jesse yelled, infusing his little Alpha bark into the command.

Austin and Seth chuckled, and I grinned down at Jesse as I grabbed his chin again. “That was cute. It might work on your malleable friends, but I am both a grownup and a bonded beta.” Using my free hand, I tugged the collar of my Henley aside to show off Seth’s bite, feeling his warmth through the bond at my pride. “Don’t bark at me again, or I’ll break another finger.”

“I don’t think he knows anything, babe,” Seth drawled, a taunting lilt to his voice. “He’s not actually part of his brother’s pack. He’s just a kid.”

“They wouldn’t tell him shit,” Austin agreed.

Jesse wiggled in my grasp. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about!”

“Don’t we?” I crooned.

“I stepped up for our pack and Alphas like us,” he hissed. “*I* took the initiative. *I* found us an omega candidate. Not Jones, not anyone one else in my pack. *Me*. Now we’re going

to have a properly housebroken and fucking obedient omega while the rest of you chumps are sitting around with your thumbs up your asses, waiting for the government to fucking *let* their precious girls sniff you and decide if you're worthy of them. You fucking pussies."

We all just stared at him.

"Where is this omega you found for your pack, Jesse?" Austin finally asked, the ice in his voice giving even me a little shiver.

He scoffed, shrugging a shoulder. "I don't know. My brother took her for training. She agreed to go, so don't fucking look at me like that."

I glanced at the guys over my shoulder, eyebrow raised. They looked about as convinced as I felt—even if this poor girl agreed to go somewhere with Jesse or his brother, I doubted she was fully informed as to what was in store for her.

Turning back to our captive, I gripped his chin harder, my blunt nails digging into the scruff on his chin. "Why don't you tell us where we might find your brother, Jesse? If you're a good boy, we'll drop you at the bus stop down the street instead of five miles out Ranch Road 505 in the middle of nowhere."

"Get your fucking hands off me, you dirty beta queer!"

He threw his weight forward with all his might.

Jesse was a big Alpha, even at seventeen, and he had about an inch of height and twenty pounds of weight on me. He also had that Alpha ego and heavy, cloying aggression in his pheromones that would incite a fight in another Alpha but tended to irk betas enough that they'd avoid engaging.

Unfortunately for him, I was both highly trained and bonded to one of the most dominant Alphas I'd ever met.

With a snicker, I let him roll us. Seth and Austin both sighed audibly as they stepped out of the way. My back hit the cold metal floor of the van, giving Jesse about three seconds of thinking he had the upper hand before I clamped my legs around him and flipped him hard.

He grunted as his head banged against the floor. “Fuck!”

“I’ll ask again, Jesse,” I said lightly, pinning him to the floor and shoving my forearm against his windpipe. “Where’s your brother?”

He spat in my face. I turned my head just in time to have the nasty wad of saliva graze my cheek instead of hitting me full on. I laughed, turning to smile down at him as his eyes widened in shock at the blast of aggression that filled the van, my love radiating pure, disgusted fury behind me.

“Cam, I’ve had enough,” Seth snarled.

I sighed. He was right, of course.

I slammed my fist into Jesse’s nose, breaking it with a satisfying crunch. He screamed and thrashed under me, but I held tight. As the blood began to gush, I leaned in to whisper right next to his ear, “That was for saying all those nasty things to my Blossom. Last chance to tell us where we might find your brother, or I’m going to let the two very big Alphas behind me have a turn with you.”

“Okay! Okay! Fuck,” he wailed.

I eased back, allowing him to bring his hands up to cover his bloody, broken nose.

“Five seconds, Riley,” Austin said.

Jesse lowered his red-streaked hands, eyeing all three of us warily.

But then he gave us a bloody smile that sent a zip of alarm through my body.

“Jones was pretty pissed when he saw Derrick St. James at the rally. We already suspected it was his bitch sister who broke into our house, but Derrick wouldn’t have known about the PRM meeting without going through our shit. Last I saw Jones, he’d grabbed a bunch of guys and was headed to their shitty hardware store to fuck things up.”

I was on my feet in an instant. “We’re going.”

Austin was already moving. “I know,” he said, opening the back doors. “Seth, cuff him. We’ll toss him out at the turnoff for South Ranch and see how long it takes him to walk home with no cell phone.”

“What? No!” Jesse shouted.

“Cam, you’re with me.”

I followed Austin as he hopped out of the van and hustled toward the driver’s side door. The last thing I heard before I slammed the doors was the thud of Seth’s boot against Jesse’s side followed by the satisfying snap of handcuffs.



AUSTIN PRACTICALLY RAN our van up onto the curb outside St. James & Co. It was nearing midnight, and the storefront was dark.

But not so dark that we missed the shattered display window next to the front entrance.

Panic sucked the air from my chest.

“Shit,” Austin said, jerking open his door and leaping from the van.

“Shit,” I agreed, following suit.

Seth was already out of the back of the van and running for the broken window. The street was quiet, all the nearby stores and restaurants closed for the night, so the gunshot that sounded from inside cracked through the silence like a whip to my skin.

All three of us pulled our pistols from our belts in a simultaneous motion. Seth vaulted into the store through the window. I jumped in next, Austin on my heels. My boots hit the cement floor with a quiet thud, and I strained desperately to see through the darkness, our only light coming from the streetlamps outside. The air was soupy with Alpha violence.

Muffled shouting reverberated around the store, and a shelf of paint cans came crashing down twenty feet in front of me.

“Dylan!” I screamed.

“Dylan!” Austin shouted from somewhere nearby.

Seth’s rage bloomed in our bond, spurring me through my panic and into action.

“I’m coming, Blossom,” I whispered, and with a fortifying breath, I ran into the chaos.

DYLAN

It had been a blissfully quiet evening. Dad took the closing shift at the store, so I'd been able to spend a long afternoon letting off steam with Daisy at the gym. Then I inhaled Thai takeout and collapsed with my tablet into a tiny not-nest I'd made with three blankets and several throw pillows in the corner of the couch.

I'd opted to binge some cozy mystery shows while we waited for Derrick to return from sneaking into the meeting of grown men throwing a tantrum at Manny's. I was determined to avoid anything resembling romance in my TV choices so I wouldn't be tempted to dwell on the fact that my own romantic life was a clusterfuck of increasingly concerning proportions.

Or that my night with Seth—and Cam—had been amazing. Until it wasn't.

Or that for one tantalizing, thrilling second, I'd been ready to demand that the two of them take me somewhere private and wring every ounce of pleasure from my body that they'd been teasing with their sexy-as-fuck dancing and mind-melting scents.

Or that I'd run away like a coward the second that thrill had morphed into terror, my brain finally overpowering my desperate, horny omega rattling the bars of her cage.

Or that I was an idiot, and I'd been close to giving up the game completely and finding myself locked on Seth's knot with his teeth in my shoulder. I had no reference for what sex

with an Alpha might do to me, but I had a strong hunch that having sex with my *scent-matched mate* while coming down off my suppressants would've blown my cover to dust.

Tonight, I'd managed to keep distracted until Derrick had returned from the PRM rally, storming into the living room fired up, disgusted, and pissed off that Jesse Riley had somehow given him the slip. He was ready to go beat some answers out of the kid, but Dad had talked him into sitting down with a beer to make a solid plan.

Minutes later, the ear-splitting crash of the store's window shattering downstairs and the blare of Dad's security alarm obliterated the evening's fragile peace.

Now I stood in the middle of the kitchen and baking aisle on the housewares side of the store in my fuzzy boots, sleep shorts, and baggy sweatshirt, sweat beading at my brow as I swung a cast-iron skillet at fucking Tim-Tad Riley.

"Bitch!" he barked, dodging what would've been a truly spectacular shot to the head, my heavy blow instead glancing off his shoulder. He grunted, then swung the butt of his empty hunting rifle at my torso.

I ducked and dropped into a crouch. With a mighty roar, I dove at his legs and took him straight into the shelf behind us. It toppled to the ground with a violent crash, steel pots and pans clattering to the floor as we landed on top of it, Tim-Tad's big, thrashing body breaking my fall.

I wasn't sure how many intruders we had in the store currently, but it was more than just the four Riley pack members—at least two or three extra thugs had joined them in this ill-advised attempt to vandalize our store. Derrick had chased Jones and another guy into the aisles on the hardware side of the store, and Mom was currently bunkered down behind the cashier counter with her rifle. She was laying down cover fire mostly aimed at the three idiots who were cowering behind the downed lighting shelf in the wide center aisle when they dared to stick their heads out and try to fire from the lone working gun they'd brought.

It was dark, so no one's shots were particularly accurate, but Mom was doing her damndest to make sure no more stray bullets were fired after Tim-Tad had managed to hit the security camera in the back ceiling corner with his last shot.

Dad was with Mom—I thought, who knew at this point?—probably hanging onto the last shreds of his control while he and Derrick tried valiantly not to kill anyone because that would have been very difficult to clean up. We really did not want to have to explain dead bodies in our store to the cops... again.

And we had some *questions* for Jones, anyway.

I kned Tim-Tad in the balls, then I grasped for his empty weapon, having lost my skillet in the crash.

“Get the fuck off me, you cunt,” he spat, yanking on the rifle.

“No can do, dickface.” I leaned on his nuts again, and he bellowed in pain. I wrenched the gun from his hands.

Before I could crow in victory, a deep voice shouted my name above the din.

“Dylan!”

Cam?

“Dylan!”

And that was Austin.

“I'm okay!” I screamed. “Take out the shooter!”

I looked up from my perch on the fallen shelf to see the dark outline of Seth barreling down the open center aisle, headed straight for the assholes hiding behind the lighting display who'd been trying to fire on Mom at the back of the store.

“No killing!” I shouted at him as I realized he held his company pistol at the ready.

His aim dropped, and he fired at the floor in rapid shots, causing the three guys to scatter from behind their barricade. He tackled the one wielding the rifle, stripped it from his

hands, then tossed it to Cam as he jetted by. The guy shouted, but Seth raised the butt of his pistol and knocked him out cold, then he spun and buried a shot in the shoulder of another Riley asshole who'd been about to jump on his back.

Footsteps pounded down my aisle, and I leapt off Tim-Tad just in time to catch the last of the Alpha thugs Seth flushed out who was running right at me. I swung the empty rifle, nailing him right in the stomach. He cursed, folding at the waist as he staggered a few feet backward. Just as he caught his breath and made to lunge at me again, Austin appeared at my side.

In a flash, he lifted his heavy boot and smashed it right into the guy's face. The asshole's head snapped back, and he crumpled to the floor in a pathetic, bleeding heap.

"I had him," I said through my labored breathing, gesturing to the body on the floor with my stolen rifle.

"I'm sure you did, Firecracker," Austin replied, his smirk just visible in the darkness. "But let me feel like a useful Alpha every once in a while, yeah?"

Cam skidded to a stop in front of our aisle. "Blossom? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Cam," I huffed as I hopped back on top of the fallen cookware shelf. Tim-Tad was trying to crawl away—like we wouldn't notice. "Nope. Where do you think you're going?" I jammed the butt of the rifle into his ribs before kicking him to his stomach. I looked at the guys. "Either of you have zip ties? Cuffs?"

Austin tossed me a pair of plastic handcuffs. I secured Tim-Tad's hands behind his back, and then I winced at the loud shouting and crash of another shelf biting the dust coming from across the way.

"Seth ran into Derrick's fight," Cam told us. "I think there were at least three more of them over there, but Seth and Derrick combined should have it under control pretty quickly."

"Where's Daisy?" Austin asked.

I motioned to the ceiling.

Cam gaped at me. “She’s where?”

“Up here!”

Daisy waved her lit phone screen at us from her spot up in the metal rafters of the store’s high ceiling.

“Cam, can you go help her?” I asked as I heard more shouting and grunting from whatever Derrick and Seth were doing. “They managed to take out our security camera, so she’s filmmaking up there with her phone.”

He didn’t need to be asked twice. He jogged for Daisy’s hammock near the back of the store, and with the effortless grace of an aerial circus performer, he launched off the brick wall with one foot and snagged the chain that secured her hammock to the ceiling. Daisy cheered for him as he shimmed up the chain and grasped the rafters above his head, pulling himself up next to her. Within seconds, his face was lit by his phone screen, those deep blue eyes electric as he got to work doing whatever the tech-y people do in these situations.

Austin pulled my attention from the two of them as he stepped in front of me, leaning down to peer into my face. “Are you hurt?” He swept a strand of hair from my sweaty cheek, his big hand coming to rest gently on the back of my neck as he studied me.

“No. A bruise or two. I’m hurt for my store, though.” I gestured around us at the complete mess these assholes had made. Once the adrenaline of the fight began to recede, I knew devastation awaited.

Another crash from across the way jolted my focus from Austin’s possessive grip and spicy whiskey scent—the violence of the night had given him a sharp edge, but I found him no less enticing. I grabbed his hand and dragged him toward Derrick’s fight.

As we approached, Dad finally hit the lights, illuminating the destruction. Half a dozen shelves and their contents spilled across the floor. The broken window, its shattered glass glittering under the lights. Blood streaks on the gray cement. Inventory littering the floor.

I supposed it wasn't as bad as it could've been, but it still hurt my heart to see our baby ravaged like this.

We found everyone near the back wall adjacent to the cashier counter. A pile of incapacitated and cuffed Alphas had been gathered nearby. In that group were the two members of the Riley pack who were not Jones and Tim-Tad as well as two other random assholes they'd probably recruited from the rally and brought along. That left Tim-Tad and one other unidentified thug back in my aisle.

Austin stepped over the pile of unconscious bodies without hesitation or even a glance down at them, like he did this sort of thing every day.

Don't you dare swoon right now, Dylan St. James.

That left Jones—Jesse apparently hadn't made it to the party—as the last Riley standing.

And he was standing—barely—in the open space behind the power tools aisle and in front of our staff hallway door, bleeding from his nose and a deep gash in his forehead as he glared at my brother with visceral hatred in his cold blue eyes.

Dad leaned against the door to the hallway with his arms crossed, watching this display like it was a mildly interesting football game. Mom sat on the counter, rifle slung across her lap and worried frown on her face. Seth stood behind Derrick, watching intently but no longer participating.

Derrick, for his part, was having a great time. He was bleeding from a cut in his cheek, but I sensed his excited bloodlust—and smelled it blanketing the air around us. He'd finally gotten the opportunity to beat the shit out of Jones Riley, and he was savoring it.

“Stop playing with him, man,” Seth said, sounding nearly bored. “We have shit to discuss with y'all.”

“Fuck off, Bryce,” Derrick replied lazily. “Jones wants another shot at me. Don't you, bro?”

Jones sucked in a struggling breath, but he managed a smile. “You think you're hot fucking shit, don't you, St.

James? You got lucky tonight when these fucking interlopers showed up to fight your battles for you.”

Seth snorted. “Dude, he had you on the ropes and flailing like a little bitch when I showed up.”

“Bullshit. Look at your precious store now!” Jones shouted, his face turning crazed as he stared at Derrick. “This is what you get for putting your nose into my pack’s business! You and those uppity little cunts you call your sisters. Your days are numbered, my friend. The time of *real* Alpha men is here, and you’re nothing. Nothing!”

He let the Alpha rage overtake him, and he charged at Derrick. Derrick dropped to a crouch and caught Jones around the middle, then he flipped him over his back with a powerful surge of his legs.

Jones crashed into the brick wall behind Derrick, and before his body had even hit the cement floor, Derrick was on him.

I watched with detached fascination as Derrick pounded the shit out of the asshole. Jones bucked under him, swinging his own fists, but it was over for him. Derrick was not only bigger but a much better fighter, and the fury and dominance spiking the thick aura of Derrick’s pheromones even had Austin whistling next to me.

“Damn,” he said, looking as casual and nonplussed as my dad as he watched. “It’s a good thing I have such great control because that is basically calling my Alpha to war.”

Cam slinked up on my other side, his zesty orange scent announcing him. “Blossom, I got you a present.”

“Oh?”

Daisy hopped up onto the counter and sat next to Mom. “It’s so awesome, Dylan. He already showed me.”

He handed me his phone. On it was a picture of Jesse Riley trussed up like a hog and bleeding from what was clearly a broken nose.

I gasped. “For me? You shouldn’t have.”

“We’re only lucky I thought to ask Seth and Austin to grab him from that godawful rally,” Cam said. “I was still mad at him for the way he spoke to you, but we worked him over enough that he admitted what his brother was up to tonight.”

“*You* worked him over,” Austin corrected. “Seth and I let Cam have all the fun with this one.”

NO. SWOONING. DYLAN.

Cam chuckled. “They did. And I shudder to think what might’ve happened in here if we hadn’t come, Blossom.”

“Derrick, enough,” Dad boomed. “He needs to be conscious to be questioned.”

With one last savage grin, Derrick peeled himself off Jones, who groaned and gurgled in pain. Derrick kicked him in the ribs for good measure, then he nodded at Seth. Seth stepped forward, toed his boot underneath Jones, and flipped him unceremoniously onto his stomach, then bent to slap some Bryce Solutions plastic cuffs on him.

“Aw, look at that teamwork,” Daisy gushed.

Derrick shot her an unimpressed look, and she stuck her tongue out at him.

Dad motioned for us all to congregate around the counter. He and Derrick hopped over the side to take up seats on the stools. Mom joined them, and Daisy spun in her spot on top of the counter to sit cross-legged, her purple flannel jammies smeared with dust but otherwise free from the blood splatter the rest of us wore, now shining in all its glory beneath the overhead fluorescent lighting.

Seth came to a stop in front of me, clasped my hand, and lifted my knuckles for examination. I had a few cuts and bruises, and he frowned at them before dropping a soft kiss to my most battered knuckle. “Are you okay, love?”

I basked in his cinnamon pastry. “I’m fine, Seth. Thank you for coming for us.”

“Of course.”

With great effort, I extricated myself from him and hopped up on the counter next to Daisy. The Bryces fell in line in front of us, and we all took a moment to let the quiet of the store—the sound of our shared victory—settle in.

After a long minute, I took a breath, bringing my eyes to Austin's, then Seth's, and finally to Cam's.

And then I gave them one of the truths they sought.

DYLAN

“Sally Brown is at the Eastern New Mexico Women’s Assistance Center,” I said, keeping my voice low so that it wouldn’t carry past the immediate vicinity of the counter. “She’s in the custody of the female Alpha who runs the center, her wife, and others trained to care for abused omegas and women. She’s received top-notch medical treatment, a new name, and will be getting her GED. She won’t be returning to the Browns, who kept her locked in her room, forced her to have sex with them whether she consented or not, and hit her when she tried to refuse.” I zeroed in on Austin again, knowing he was the one who had to make the final call. “I hope this information, given to you in confidence, is enough for Bryce Solutions to walk away from this case.”

Austin’s honey-brown eyes filled with warmth. “We were ready to walk away after the rally. But thank you, Dylan, for trusting us with that.”

“Have you... liberated other girls and taken them to this center?” Cam asked casually.

I grinned at him. *Stop being so adorable, sir.* “Nice try. One thing at a time.”

“Yeah,” Daisy said. “I wanna hear what you beat out of that turd Jesse.”

Cam’s answering smile was grim. “We beat enough out of him to find out we need to beat more out of older brother over there to get any real information.” He waved a hand in the general direction of where Jones lay, clinging to

consciousness. “But they took your girl, Dylan. Whoever she is.”

“Her name is Mary Rose,” I replied. “And she’s fourteen years old.”

Seth cursed. “We need to move, then. It sounded like they snatched her for bonding, like, imminently. Those disgusting *fucks*.”

Dad cleared his throat. He remained seated on his stool behind the counter with Mom tucked up under his big arm as he studied the guys. “We really appreciate you boys jumping in to help tonight. Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but it appears Bryce Solutions might be interested in lending a hand with our search for Mary Rose?”

Austin nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Nobody is paying us anything,” Dad added with a pointed look. “We help girls in need when we can. That’s all there is to it.”

“Admirable,” Cam replied with a grin. “We’re in.”

It was Derrick’s turn to stare them down. “And we can count on your discretion about all of this?”

“We will have to loop in our fathers,” Austin replied, unflinching as usual under Derrick’s menacing stare. “But discretion is a given in our line of work.”

“And as a token of our goodwill,” Cam added, “I’ve engaged our on-call cleanup crew to dispense with these criminals who terrorized your store. I suggested they pile them in a van and dump them halfway out Ranch Road 505 so they can stumble the rest of the way home like little Jesse will be doing as we speak. We will let them know that if they even breathe in the direction of the St. James family again, the choice footage that Daisy and I have on our phones and now Bryce Solutions’ secure server will land on the county sheriff’s desk.”

I couldn’t help my pleased smile. “So thoughtful, Cameron.”

Even Derrick grunted in agreement. “That works.”

“Yes, it does.” Dad scrubbed a hand down his beard. He looked as tired as I suddenly felt. “The help is very much appreciated. Let’s move our guest of honor to the back and see what we can get him to tell us. I’m sure we’d all like to sleep at some point tonight.”

Everyone moved at once. Derrick hopped back over the counter to saunter merrily over to Jones, all of the Bryces hot on his heels. Mom stood up from her stool and made her way over to where Daisy and I sat. She looped her arms around us in a big group hug, squeezing tight.

“I’m so glad you girls are okay,” she whispered. “That was the scariest thing I’ve ever experienced, and I’ve been in an active war zone.”

“Our children weren’t in that war zone with us,” Dad said, standing up to survey the carnage on the store floor. “I’ll call the insurance company in the morning. It’s just stuff, and it can be replaced. It’ll all be okay.”

It would be. We protected our store and one another, and now we were going to make Jones Riley wish he hadn’t set foot outside of South Ranch today.



ST. James & Co. kept a large storeroom at the end of the staff hallway. After Dad and I spent five strenuous minutes convincing Mom and Daisy to throw in the towel and go to bed, we meandered on back. We found Jones strapped to a metal chair with those handy plastic cuffs the Bryce boys kept on them, back to being fully alert and glaring murder at my brother.

Derrick lazed in another chair, facing Jones, his dark eyes focused, while Austin loomed like a hot gargoyle behind him. Seth and Cam had found themselves an empty spot on top of one of the cluttered tables lining the side wall, and they sat shoulder to shoulder, exchanging the occasional whisper while Cam’s long fingers flew over his phone screen.

Jones spat a wad of bloody saliva at Derrick's feet. "Stop looking so fucking smug, St. James. Like you have some sort of high ground. The minute I saw you at the rally, I knew it was your cunt sister and that little beta street rat who broke into my house. You all had this coming, and it's too damn bad I didn't get my hands on one of them tonight. I would've really fucking enjoyed it."

Derrick considered him. After a moment, he stood from his chair, cocked his arm back, and slammed his fist into Jones's nose.

His agonized groan and the crunch of broken bone sent a satisfying thrill down my spine. We'd rescued more than a handful of girls over the years from abusive pricks, but it was rare to be able to mete out justice on their behalf against the men who harmed them.

We didn't know if Jones and his pack of slimeballs had hurt Mary Rose, but the intention was there. He fucking deserved this.

"Derrick, you're benched," Dad announced, sounding weary.

Derrick wiped the blood spatter from his face, then turned to glare at Dad. "What the hell?"

Dad pointed at the wall, like he was sending a kid to timeout. "Take a breather. We need a cooler head here."

"I've got it." Austin stepped up next to Derrick and gave him a light shove. Derrick blew out a defeated breath and gave Austin the finger, but he stalked over to stand next to Dad by the door without further protest.

During all of this, I'd floated closer to Seth and Cam as if pulled by an invisible string. When I came within striking distance, Cam grabbed me by the back of my sweatshirt and pulled me the rest of the way, depositing me between Seth's legs for safekeeping, then he continued with whatever he was doing on his phone.

I didn't put up a fight. Now that the rush of battle no longer coursed through my veins, I felt rattled. Violated by

what these assholes tried to do to my family. The second Seth's warm thighs settled around me and his big hand landed on the back of my neck, my muscles relaxed for the first time since we heard the store window shatter from our living room.

"Watch this, sweetheart," Seth murmured in my ear. "Austin will make him sing like a canary."

I shivered.

Austin stood in front of Derrick's chair and regarded our bruised and bloody captive, who could only glower silently back at him. Without warning, he kicked the legs from under Jones's chair, dumping him onto his side. He clattered to the ground, his limbs still strapped to the chair and his battered face now pressed to the cold cement floor.

As Jones barked out a string of curses, Austin pulled Derrick's chair closer and sat down. "I've decided we're going to talk like this."

"Fuck you."

Austin smiled. He lifted his foot and pressed the toe of his boot right into the mess that was Jones's broken nose. "Try again."

Jones roared in pain. "Fine! Fuck, fine."

Austin removed his boot and settled back in his chair. He looked like he was about to watch a boring movie, but his pheromones told a different story. The air was thick with his overwhelming dominance, and even Derrick appeared begrudgingly impressed with it all. "Wonderful. My name is Austin Bryce, and over there, seated on the table, are my packmates—my brother, Seth, and his bonded beta, Cameron. We work for a private investigation and personal security firm called Bryce Solutions, and I should warn you that this is not my first rodeo extracting information from an uncooperative person of interest."

"I don't give a fuck who you are," Jones grumbled. "Just tell me what you want."

"Great. I appreciate your willingness to cooperate, Mr. Riley. I'm sure you, like the rest of us, would like to get some

sleep at some point this evening, and it'll be a long walk back to South Ranch for you."

Cam hummed thoughtfully. He'd tucked his phone away and was now absently twirling a strand of hair from my disheveled ponytail around his finger. "I wonder if little Jesse made it home yet. We left his legs mostly in working order when we tossed him out on the highway, but that broken nose will be hurting like a bitch. Aw, the brothers will match. How adorable."

Jones managed a growl. "What the fuck did you do to my brother?"

"Much less than has been done to you," Austin replied. "He was kind enough to inform us of your activities tonight. And he also insisted that you know the location of the fourteen-year-old girl that you've kidnapped for whatever this bullshit *program* you and those meatheads in PRM have cooked up. Just tell us where we can find her, and you'll be free to go."

Jones scoffed. "You're just another pussy too scared to be a real Alpha. Content to just wait in line for your government-issued omega. My pack found what we wanted, so we took it."

"Did you now?"

"Stop acting like we aren't doing these girls a favor. They want our knots just as bad as we want to give them because it's what they were fucking made for. The young ones can be taught their place without us having to go through so much fucking trouble to break them later and bring them to heel. You and your pack should join the movement instead of hanging around these pathetic sack-of-shit St. James Alphas."

It was the abrasive aura of Dad's disgust and outrage that now seeped into the air. That tirade had hit a little too close to home for him.

Seth's hand stiffened on the back of my neck, and Cam—bless him—read the room perfectly.

"Mr. St. James, our crew has arrived, if you'd like to meet them? I'm sure they could use some direction."

The tension in Dad's huge shoulders released like he'd been knocked back into the present, and he nodded. "Thanks, Cameron."

He left the room, the door clicking shut behind him.

Jones snorted a wet sound of amusement. "What's this, anyway? Are you all too busy sticking your dicks in Dylan that you've lost sight of what a real pack should be? Is that why you're here? I get it—I bet that pussy is juicy, but it'll always be second rate compared to omega snatch."

I rolled my eyes. "Like you know what it's like to fuck an omega, you delusional prick."

A pocketknife appeared in Austin's hand. A second later, it was embedded in the meaty flesh of Jones's thigh.

He bit down on a scream, and I'd have been shocked if he didn't crack a tooth from the way he was clenching his jaw.

"Refrain from insulting Dylan, please," Austin said lightly. "Your brother already learned that lesson."

I glanced over my shoulder at Cam, quirking a brow.

He grinned mischievously, whispering, "You know how I am about that, Blossom."

"Enough fucking around." Austin reached out and twisted the knife, and Jones let out another stream of expletives. "Where is Mary Rose?"

"I don't have her."

Another twist. "That's not what I asked."

"Fuck! Okay! The militia is using the old parochial school out on Woodstone as its headquarters. I'm pretty sure that's where they're keeping the girls."

Austin's face was stone. "Girls?"

Jones managed a shrug from his sideways position. "We only submitted Mary Rose, but the militia has other names. Some of the other packs have probably found them and submitted them for training."

I struggled against the urge to yank that knife out of his thigh and jam it into his dick. “Was Lily Linnartz *submitted for training*?” I asked.

“I don’t fucking know.”

Austin tossed me a questioning look over his shoulder. “You’re missing two girls?”

“That fucker had her name on a list I found in his room, along with Mary Rose and one other girl. Derrick and Daisy checked on Lily, and she’s been missing since Monday. The other girl is fine but has since left town.”

“You are such a meddling *bitch*.”

Austin slammed his fist into Jones’s crotch, and he keened like a herd of dying cats. “I warned you. Next time I’ll let Derrick tag in, and we both know he’ll be tempted to just kill you.”

Derrick grunted. “Truth.”

“What does it mean to be submitted for training?” Austin asked.

“It means we want obedient fucking omegas,” Jones grouched. “They’ve all become so fucking uppity now. The militia identifies omega candidates who haven’t gone through the government bullshit yet, and they get a crash course in how to act right and please their Alphas. The program just started, so I assume once the militia determines the girls are ready, they’ll be handed over to the pack that chose them. Finders keepers and all that.”

Austin stared at him. “And your intention is to bond the omega you found into your pack? The fourteen-year-old girl? *A child*?”

“She had a pair of tits on her that would beg to differ, so yes. Assuming she wasn’t fucking lying about being an omega.”

Uh-oh.

Austin’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“She smells like a beta, but she told Jesse she’s been taking illegal hormone suppressants to hide from the government. But that all went out the window when she was presented with the opportunity to ride my little brother’s knot, didn’t it? All women are the fucking same.”

“How does she have access to illegal suppressants?”

Jones glared at him like he was losing patience. “I don’t fucking know, but ask your whore over there. There’s always women sneaking in and out of this piece-of-shit store, and I think they’re up to something.”

Seth gave me a comforting squeeze. I would’ve bet my modest savings account that the Bryces were clicking the puzzle pieces together, but at this point, I also doubted they cared what we got up to as long as we were helping women in need.

I could only hope they didn’t think to include me in that category.

Austin didn’t take the bait. “So, to summarize—to your knowledge, Mary Rose and potentially some other omegas who have either been kidnapped or lured away from their families are being held at the old parochial school grounds on Woodstone?”

“Yeah.”

“And, to your knowledge, girls held there will be handed over to packs participating in this PRM bullshit to be forcibly bonded without government approval?”

“It’s not the government’s fucking business who an Alpha wants to bond. It’s our fucking basic *right*.”

“Unfortunately, the laws of the United States government do still apply to you. You can’t just wave a magic wand and declare yourself a sovereign entity.”

“Fucking watch me, you cuck.”

Austin sighed. The exhaustion of the night was finally starting to show on his handsome face. “I suggest you and your pack quietly extricate yourselves from the *militia* and

leave town. We are going to dismantle their little headquarters with extreme prejudice, and I am personally going to look that T.R. shithead in his face and let him know it was the Riley pack that fucked this all up for them. I don't think that'll make your buddies very happy, do you?"

I felt my adrenaline rev again. We were going to get our girls back.

"Fuck you," Jones spat.

"Great, I'm glad we had this talk."

Seth chuckled behind me. "Our crew lead has volunteered to drop the lot of them out on the highway. If we hurry, we can toss this dickhead on top of the pile."

Austin wrenched the knife from Jones's thigh and quickly slashed through the zip ties binding his limbs to the chair. Jones rolled to his hands and knees, took a fortifying breath, then staggered to his feet. His head snapped up, and his beady blue eyes locked on Derrick.

He stumbled forward, then charged.

Derrick grinned, pushed away from the wall, and launched a final punch into the side of Jones's head. He collapsed back to the floor, out like a light.

Seth looked at Derrick, amused. "Aside from the obvious, what's the beef with you two?"

Derrick shrugged. "He was an overinflated dick in high school who couldn't handle the fact that no one with any sense wanted to join his future pack. Now he comes around here and says shit about Daisy and my sister to try to goad me. It was time he learned."

He bent over, grabbed Jones by his legs, then proceeded to drag him unceremoniously out the door.

Cam snickered, still playing with my hair. "Austin, we should convince your dads to hire him. And Dylan too. They're so resourceful and... violent."

I gave him a doe-eyed stare. "You're the sweetest. But I already have a job."

Austin cracked his knuckles and shook out his arms, and then he rolled his eyes at Cam. “I’ll let you put the hard sell on the whole St. James family later. We have other things we need to convince our dads about at the moment.”

Seth groaned. “Fuck, they’re gonna be pissed we didn’t call them earlier.”

“They’ll get over it,” Austin said with a lazy shrug, and then he fixed me with a *look*. “After we chat with them, I think we should all make sure Dylan gets tucked into bed safe and sound.”

I had to work hard not to fall into those ferocious amber eyes. He probably wanted to fix what he thought might be broken between me and his pack after what went down last night at the Javelina, and it sent a jolt of unease through my body.

Luckily, we had way bigger fish to fry.

“If you say so, big man. Right now, we need to brief my dad on what we learned from that dickhead.”

Austin grinned. “Perfect, let’s brief my bosses too. I can’t wait to introduce you to our parents.”

DYLAN

We all crowded into Dad's office as he fired up his laptop and the large screen mounted on the wall. He usually had the news or the occasional football game playing on the screen while he worked, but it was also equipped with a camera for video conferencing.

"I've messaged my dad, Andrew, via the emergency line," Austin said, referring to the elder Bryce pack member we knew was the CEO of Bryce Solutions. "He should hopefully log on in the next few minutes."

I sank deeper into my chair, exhaustion flooding my bones, heavy as lead. Cam had guilelessly pulled another chair right up next to mine, while Seth held up the wall nearby. Derrick made himself at home on the corner of Dad's desk, and Austin stood in front of the screen as he waited for his dad-slash-boss to join the meeting he'd been summoned to in the middle of the damn night.

We all looked like we'd been through it. Derrick appeared to have gotten his hands the dirtiest—he still had dried blood that was not his splattered across his gray T-shirt and neck. He'd at least cleaned the cut on his face and slapped a Band-Aid on it that did not really look up to the task. Dad had worked with the cleanup crew and walked away with grime and bodily fluids on his long-sleeved thermal shirt. Seth's knuckles looked like mine—beat to shit—and we were both a little filthy from rolling around on the floor at various points in the evening. My bare knees were scuffed, and I had a cut on my shin.

Austin's jeans, which to the point of distraction fit his thick thighs like a glove, hadn't escaped the blood spatter. The neck of his sweatshirt had also been torn, revealing the deep V of his T-shirt collar underneath and a hint of that tanned, muscular chest.

I was too tired to will the horny thoughts out of my head, nor did I have the energy to refuse the comfort of Cam's strong hand as he reached for mine. He threaded our fingers together while he rubbed soothing little circles on my palm with his thumb.

"Don't worry, Blossom," he whispered. "We're here now. Everything will be okay."

How I wished that was true.

Finally, the screen lit up, revealing the face of a handsome older man with light brown hair just graying at the temples, glasses, and the same golden-brown eyes as Austin. His hair had that mussed just-yanked-from-bed look, but he snapped into alert professional mode the second he appeared onscreen.

"Austin, what in the world is going on?"

"Dad, we have a situation."

Andrew's gaze darted quickly around, taking in the rest of us scattered about the room before he returned his scrutiny to Austin. "I gathered that from the alert to our emergency line."

Another man appeared, rubbing his eyes with a large fist as he leaned over Andrew's shoulder. "Austin? What's happened?"

"Hey, Pop."

"That's Rodrigo," Cam whispered in my ear. "Head of security."

I hummed, eyeing the massive dark-haired man taking up the entire right side of the frame as he elbowed his way in to get a closer look at Andrew's screen. "I know."

Cam chuckled. "Love that you've studied us, babe."

“Should I get started, or are we waiting for Jere to join us?” Austin asked his dads.

Jericho Bryce was the third and final member of the elder Bryce Pack who was attached to Bryce Solutions. We hadn’t been able to determine exactly what he did for the organization or what his history was—he had no record of military or government service or even a college degree.

Andrew shook his head. “No, he’s still out lurking in whatever bar your mother’s girls’ night out has taken them all to.”

Austin frowned. “Mom’s at a bar at one thirty in the morning?”

“I just said Jericho’s there keeping an eye on her,” Andrew replied, growing impatient.

Derrick and I shared a look, and I rolled my eyes. God forbid Austin and Seth’s omega mother was allowed a night out without her Alpha’s supervision.

“Austin, tell us what the hell this is all about,” Rodrigo demanded. “Right now.”

For his part, Austin was the picture of calm in the face of his increasingly agitated and very Alpha fathers. “First, I want to introduce you to Brandon St. James, his son, Derrick, and his daughter, Dylan. We’re in his office inside the St. James & Co. hardware store down in Merchant Village.”

Rodrigo’s dark brows hit his hairline. “You’re where? And wait... Brandon St. James?” His focus shifted over Austin’s shoulder to where Dad sat behind his desk. “Green Berets? Operation Babylon?”

Dad nodded. “That’s me.”

Rodrigo’s gaze became cunning. “Any chance you’re looking for a job?”

Andrew elbowed him. “Quit that. Austin, please continue.”

“I want to first make you both aware that we’re dropping the Browns’ case,” Austin said, his tone daring them to argue. “We’ve determined they were abusing their omega, and the St.

James family helped us confirm that Sally is safe, hidden, and well cared for in her current location.”

They both stared at him, the silence stretching uncomfortably. Finally, Andrew asked, “You’re *very* sure about this?”

“One hundred percent.”

Seth shoved away from the wall and went to stand at Austin’s side, his tattooed arms crossed as he stared into the camera. “I back Austin completely on this, as does Cam. Send them a disengagement letter and refund their dirty money. We don’t want it.”

Rodrigo coughed. “All right, all right. Heard you loud and clear. Now tell us why Austin has blood spatter all over his jeans and his shirt is torn while your hands look like you bare-knuckle boxed with a brick wall.”

A beep sounded from their side of the call. Andrew’s eyes narrowed as he reviewed whatever had just landed on his phone, and then he glared at his sons. “And tell us why our on-call cleanup crew just logged the removal of seven severely injured but apparently not dead Alphas from that address?”

Austin sighed, and then he launched into the story. He told them how their investigation of the Browns had led them first to our store and later to the PRM rally. He glossed over the specifics of why Jesse Riley was a person of interest that they decided to “interview” after the rally, but he did explain how they came to ride to our rescue. He described the attack on our store and the subsequent interrogation of Jones Riley.

Seth then gave a quick rundown of what they’d learned about PRM itself before explaining exactly what we’d managed to get out of Jones about the possible location of kidnapped omega girls and the reason they were being held.

Dad was also hearing the Jones portion of the story for the first time. His frown deepened as Austin and Seth provided the details, his knuckles turning white around the ballpoint pen he’d been fidgeting with.

Andrew and Rodrigo had sobered appropriately during the briefing. “We’ll put a team on this,” Andrew said. “I want us inside that old school complex tomorrow night if at all possible. This cannot be allowed to continue.”

“We’d like to be involved,” Dad said, and his tone said he was not asking for permission. “Mary Rose’s grandmother asked us to find her almost a week ago, and we intend to make right on our promise to do so.”

“Of course,” Rodrigo replied quickly.

I raised my hand. “I’ll need to be the one to make initial contact with the girls. They won’t want to see another Alpha male or male in general, much less trust one to lead them to safety. If you guys can get me in, I’ll get them out.”

All Bryces in the room and on the screen looked my way. Austin shot me a pointed look that was almost chastising, like he really was not a fan of the idea, but he couldn’t hide the hot little gleam in his eyes, either.

That’s right, big man. Nobody puts Dylan in a corner.

“I like her,” Rodrigo said after a moment.

“Cameron appears to feel the same,” Andrew muttered, eyeing Cam’s hand around mine as Cam grinned unrepentantly at his fathers-in-law.

“Dylan will be as much of an asset to this operation as my son or your boys,” Dad added firmly. “And she’s correct that frightened omega girls who have been subjected to abuse at the hands of Alpha men will be much quicker to trust a female, especially a beta, than one of us. It doesn’t matter that we’re there to rescue them. We’d prefer not to traumatize them any further.”

None of the Bryces were born yesterday. It had to be clear to them by now that the St. James family was not just in the hardware and home goods business, but we were all now focused on a singular goal and needed to execute it as quickly as possible.

Those questions could wait.

“I’ll gather our team—including my sons,” Andrew said, shooting Austin a stern look, “first thing in the morning. We’ll all meet up again to draw up a game plan by... let’s say one o’clock, with a goal of going in at nightfall if we determine it’s feasible.”

“Sounds good,” Dad replied.

“Agreed,” Austin said.

“Let’s all try to get at least some sleep then,” Andrew said, finally allowing himself to sound weary. “We’re going to need it.”



AFTER DAD HAD SHAKEN each of the Bryces’ hands and Derrick had given them the barest of respectful nods, the two of them disappeared up the stairs to check on Mom and Daisy before finally heading to bed.

That left me standing in the dim hallway, surrounded by the guys and their harmoniously mingling scents as I struggled with what to say to them now.

I could tell them how I couldn’t thank them enough for racing here and throwing themselves straight into a violent altercation with half a dozen crazed Alpha men. They’d saved our store from further damage and almost certainly saved me or members of my family further injury.

Or I could mention how I was equal parts nervous and giddy at the prospect of working with them to kick PRM’s door down and rescue our girls.

Or, of course, I could let them know how sorry I was that I ran away from Seth and Cam last night—or was it technically two nights ago now?—but that I wouldn’t be able to explain how I could desperately want something and also be truly terrified of the same exact thing.

Instead, I said nothing.

I stood there and stared at the three of them as the weight of the entire night began to press in on me, the thought of them leaving suddenly a sharp ache in my chest.

My eyes burned.

My lower lip wobbled the tiniest bit.

Oh no.

“Hey, no, it’s okay, Firecracker,” Austin said, pulling me into the world’s greatest hug. “Everything will be okay. You kicked ass tonight, and the store is already on its way to being fixed right up, and we’re gonna get your girls back tomorrow.”

I buried my face in his torn sweatshirt, luxuriating in spicy whiskey and sniffing like a fucking *girl*. It felt so damn good in his arms that the shuddering breath I exhaled almost rolled into a *purr*.

Shit, no, lock that all the way up, Dylan St. James.

Omeegas purred for their Alphas when they were content, just as Alphas purred for their omegas to soothe and calm them. Obviously I’d never purred in my goddamned life, and it took a few more calm, focused breaths before I was sure I’d stomped that insanity right out.

A low rumble that was almost a growl sounded behind me, and Austin’s chest vibrated with a chuckle. He pressed a kiss to the top of my head, and then he released me gently, spinning me right into Seth’s strong arms.

“I don’t really want to leave you,” Seth muttered into my hair as he squeezed me tight. “But you need to sleep, and I think I’ll lose the small amount of ground I’ve gained with Derrick if I run into him in the hallway on the way out of your room in the morning.”

I snorted into the crook of his neck, where I’d been huffing cinnamon roll like a junkie. “Probably. Though that slut has no room to talk.”

Seth laughed before he pulled away just enough to look down at me with those dark eyes, so fathomlessly black now in the low light. “Are we okay? After, you know...?”

I nodded. “We’re fine, Seth. I’m just trying to make sure none of us do something we’ll... regret.”

He frowned but didn't push further. He kissed my forehead, then I found myself snuggled tight in Cam's embrace.

I sighed, sinking into his rich, spicy orange scent. He'd tied his long hair up in a messy knot at some point during the night, giving me full access to the soft skin of his neck.

"You're not mad at us, Blossom?" he whispered, his tone uncharacteristically hesitant.

"No, Cam."

"Okay. Good."

I breathed him in, and I felt him do the same to me. "Thank you for coming tonight."

"I'll always come when you need me. We all will."

It was a dangerously enticing thought.

I met Austin's gaze over Cam's shoulder. "I should get to bed," I whispered, still clinging to Cam. "We have a big day tomorrow."

He nodded. "Cam, let her go."

"No."

"Cameron."

He huffed against my hair. "Fine."

His grip loosened, and I slipped away, taking a small step backward. He reached for me one last time, his long fingers caressing my cheek as he said, "Goodnight, Blossom."

Then he pressed his lips to mine in the briefest kiss.

"Cameron," Austin growled.

"Smooth, babe," Seth added, chuckling.

Cam grinned at me. For a second, I stared at him, wide-eyed like some shrinking violet who'd never kissed a boy before, and then I managed to come back online.

"Goodnight, Cam," I said, returning his teasing smile. I looked at Austin and Seth. "Goodnight, boys. See you

tomorrow.”

I turned and marched down the hall to the stairs, head held high and strides purposeful, like those three hugs and one little kiss hadn't rocked my world almost as hard as the violent invasion of our store had hours earlier.

SETH

The wrought iron fence that surrounded the now-defunct School of the Holy Atonement loomed in the distance, just visible through the thick grove of sycamore trees where we readied ourselves for tonight's rescue. The full moon, obscured only slightly by the wispy winter clouds, gave us enough visibility that we'd dispensed with our night-vision goggles.

"Was this place a school or a fucking prison?" I asked Austin, who stood a few feet away, binoculars pressed to his face. "That's a twelve-foot fence, and those points are meant to impale someone if they tried to escape."

He shrugged. "Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference."

The dark figure of Cameron appeared up ahead, making his way toward us on silent feet. He, like the rest of the Bryce Solutions team, was outfitted in dark camouflage, a ballistic vest, and a helmet linked to our comms team. He'd been snaking his way around the perimeter of the school, which took up the equivalent of four city blocks—if those blocks had been dropped in the middle of a wooded area just west of town.

Our team had sent drones out at first light this morning, and we now had a solid grasp of the layout of the school grounds. The main gate lay to the north, accessed by a long gravel driveway that extended out to the road. This entrance led to the single academic building—a classic redbrick schoolhouse three stories tall. The white trim had yellowed

with age, and its classrooms had been rented out as office space until PRM had gotten its hands on the place.

On the west side of the campus stood the chapel, a two-story T-shaped structure with a stucco exterior and Spanish-tiled roof. Its lancet windows stretched from top to bottom, and its wooden doors had been bolted shut. No Sunday services were being held there anymore, which was great news for us on this chilly Sunday night.

The middle of campus contained an open courtyard that may have once been lush and green but was now a vast stretch of patchy, dry grass. Along the eastern border was an old gymnasium, and it was getting at least some use, according to the drone footage of the dozens of men crawling around this place at any given time.

Finally, to the south and back of campus was the dormitory. A three-story building made of drab gray stone, it was a squat U-shape, its walls wrapping around another small courtyard at its entrance.

A suspiciously higher number of the armed “militia” milled in this courtyard, which meant our girls were being held inside the dorms somewhere.

The rest of the guard had set up at the main gate, with a smaller team on the northwest gate that accessed the chapel and another at the southeast entrance between the gym and the dorms. The enemy forces appeared to be a mix of country-boy Alphas wearing their weapons like jewelry and professional hired guns—which meant we would need to dig further into who else might be funding this bullshit.

“Slight change in the guard since our drone footage from two hours ago,” Cam announced as he reached our hiding spot. “They’ve locked up the main gate and left a skeleton crew to guard it. They’ve shifted more bodies to the northwest gate. Best I can tell, the streetlights give the main entrance a ton of visibility at night, and you can easily see it from the road. They think that if anyone is going to try to steal their precious cargo, they’ll come at them from the side entrances.”

I chuckled. “Well, they’re not wrong.”

“Did everyone copy that?” Austin asked.

“Copied,” came Rodrigo’s gruff voice in our ears. “Shouldn’t be a problem. Andrew will monitor from HQ, and I’ll adjust Jere’s position to the northwest gate.”

“That will be fun for those unfortunate souls,” Cam muttered, sounding amused.

I bounced on my toes, ready to fucking do this. It had been a while since we’d been able to stretch our legs like we had when we took out the trash yesterday at the St. James & Co. store, and my bloodlust was still pumping. It was time to cut PRM out at the root before it had a chance to spread its disease any further, and we were going to make a show of it.

There was an uncomfortable hint of anxiety dampening my excitement, though, and it was 100 percent because Dylan was going to be throwing herself headfirst into this mission alongside us. I was wrestling with the idea that she could be seriously hurt tonight, the dread sitting like a heavy weight in my gut.

And I could never tell her that, or she’d punch me in the dick.

At least Austin was faring worse. The protective aggression that’d radiated from him, jagged and potent, every time Dylan’s role in tonight’s raid was mentioned at the all-hands meeting earlier this afternoon had gotten him some curious looks.

The St. James family had all appeared tired but in decent spirits when we’d met via video conference. We knew from the cleanup crew’s report that they’d not only tossed the Riley Pack and their friends out in the middle of nowhere on their asses, but that a few of the crew had stayed behind to put the store back together as best they could—righting shelves, trashing broken inventory, and cleaning the blood and other bodily fluids from the floor.

It’d been a relief for me—for all three of us—to hear. That wasn’t just a store. It was Dylan’s *home*, and the idea of it being left in ruins had deeply unsettled me.

Just another weird fucking thing to be feeling about a beta girl I'd known for all of one week.

We'd have been on her doorstep again this morning if our dads hadn't dragged us back to headquarters and demanded another report of what exactly the three of us had been up to this past week. Fortunately for us, they really hadn't had the time to pry because our collective focus had shifted quickly to tonight's mission. Our intel gathering had been swift, our game-planning a well-oiled machine. Dylan and her family had melded right into it all.

Rodrigo buzzed in our ears. "When Brandon confirms the St. Jameses are in position, we'll be a go."

"Copy," Austin said.

He handed the binoculars to me. I peered through them at our target—the southeast gate. I could make out the small cluster of guards meandering just behind the thin iron bars of the gate, which was locked around the clock using only a heavy-looking chain and a padlock that'd seen better days. The gravel driveway split about twenty yards beyond the entrance, the right fork leading to the gym and the left to the dorms.

"Dylan had better wait for us," Austin muttered.

Cam snorted. "I don't think our Blossom will be taking orders from you, fearless leader."

He could only grunt in agreement, and I stifled a laugh. While our team was tasked with attacking directly through the southeast gate to distract and engage the guards, Dylan's team would be covertly entering over the southern fence, directly behind the dorm building. When Austin had inquired at our meeting exactly how she planned to do that, her response had been, "Don't worry about it."

"The St. Jameses are in place," Rodrigo announced in our ears. "All teams ready?"

We listened as the Bryce Solutions team leads sounded off—Rodrigo's small team at the main gate, Jericho's larger team

at the northwest entrance, and the other three-man team assigned to the southeast gate with us.

“Red Team is a go,” Austin said, ending the roll call.

“Remember, disarm and subdue when you can, but we are authorized to shoot to kill,” Rodrigo said, attempting to sound grave, but it came out a little giddy.

Bryce Solutions had an excellent relationship with the county sheriff, a beta who had served with Rodrigo. The sheriff wanted nothing to do with a militia of angry Alphas trafficking underage omega girls, and he’d only told Andrew to “try not to make a giant mess.”

I wouldn’t be trying very hard on that front.

A bright flare launched from beyond the main road, bursting into a peony of red and orange with a deafening boom over the school grounds.

“Time’s up!” Austin barked, and he took off toward the gate.

“Let’s do this,” I added with a bloodthirsty grin at Cam.

He snickered, and we both sprinted after Austin, hot on his heels.

Confused shouting sounded from the roaming guards, who were no longer roaming so much as running around like a bunch of headless chickens. Austin came to a stop ten feet from the gate. He raised his pistol and fired at the rusty padlock. It exploded into shards, and the chain that had been looped through the gate’s pickets flopped to the ground.

I sprinted past Austin and kicked the gate hard with my heavy boot. It swung inward on creaky hinges and slammed straight into the two rent-a-cops who’d gathered their wits enough to rush to protect the entrance. The impact knocked them both to the ground, and Cam and I were on them in a flash.

“Disarm and cuff!” Austin shouted as he ran by.

“This isn’t my first time!” I yelled back.

Another firework burst above us, and more shouting and gunshots sounded from across the grounds.

Blue Team sprinted past, saluted us as we cuffed our captives, then intercepted the half dozen or so reinforcements who were converging on the gate. The rest of the “militia” on the back half of the property would be making their stand in front of the dorm at its sole entrance, guarding their prisoners.

Cam gave his cuffed guard a swift kick in the ribs, and then he grinned at me. “Let’s go, babe. I don’t wanna miss the fun.”

I slammed the butt of my gun into my guy’s head, knocking him out cold. “Did you notice the logo on their shirts?” I asked Cam as I stood up and holstered my weapon. “Fucking Titan Strategies.”

“Oh, Andrew will *love* that.”

They were shady as fuck and a direct competitor of ours in the hired security realm, though there was no contest, and they knew it. We would wipe the floor with them tonight, and my dad would gloat for months.

“Catch up, you two,” Austin barked in our ears.

I rolled my eyes at Cam, and then we were off, sprinting toward the dorm. We caught up to Austin, who’d ducked into a copse of trees, just as he popped out to fire two perfect shots at the pair of Titan guards running at him with their weapons raised. They dropped, clearing our path to the front of the building.

Twin clangs sounded off to our left, tearing our attention from our target. Two grappling hooks appeared over the top of the back fence, directly behind the dorm.

“Oh shit,” I said, struck a little dumb as I watched the lithe, dark form of Dylan shimmy up the rope attached to her hook and vault over the spiked pickets. Derrick followed, way too fucking graceful for a dude his size. They landed lightly on the dirt below, then sprinted for the back of the building.

Derrick ran ahead, and then he pulled to a stop right underneath the small second-floor balcony that blueprints our

team had acquired told us led to the dorm's only lounge area. He crouched, and Dylan didn't break stride as she ran at him, using his hands as a step as he launched her into the air.

"Are they fucking serious?" Austin growled.

Dylan grasped the bottom of the balcony railing. She swung a long leg up to the ledge, then pulled herself up and over the railing with grace that rivaled Cameron's on his best day. She pulled her pistol from her belt, fired two shots at the lounge's glass door, then kicked the shattered glass from the frame.

"I might be in love," Cam said as we watched her disappear into the building.

"Fuck," Austin swore, taking off again.

"Fuck is right," I said, running after him, Cam at my side.

We needed to decimate the contingent guarding the dorm before they caught wind that our girl had snuck in the back.

Derrick, satisfied his sister was safely inside, took off in our direction. We met up with him as we reached the side of the building. Around the corner was the dorm's courtyard and the morass of militia guards.

"You fuckers ready?" he asked, excitement dancing in his hazel eyes.

Austin smirked. "Try to keep up, St. James."

"You will eat my dust, Bryce."

"Measure dicks later," Cam huffed, pulling his gun. "We need to cover Blossom."

"Blossom?" Derrick said with a disbelieving snort. "Seriously?"

"Extremely," I replied, deadpan, before I looked at my brother and Cam. "Last one inside has to do the paperwork!"

I pulled both of my pistols from my belt, spun them once around on my fingers with a flourish, shot a shitty wink at Derrick, then I was off.

DYLAN

I landed lightly on the crunch of glass that now littered the dorm lounge's beige carpet. It only took me about sixty seconds after that to declare the second floor devoid of kidnapped girls or idiot guards. I stalked through the hallways from the east wing to the west, pushing open unlocked doors with one hand while I held my pistol aloft with the other.

Nothing. The hallways were silent save for the ruckus of shouting and gunshots outside the building. The whole place seemed sterile and dreary, but I imagined the presence of students would've added a lot of color and life to an old dorm like this.

Not that I would know. I didn't get to go to college.

"Second floor is clear, as we expected," I said, keeping my voice low.

"Right, the top floor makes the most sense," Dad replied, sounding winded. "Prisoners have the furthest to go to escape—Rodrigo! Three o'clock!"

A crash, a muffled yell, and a gunshot.

"Did Mom make it up to the choir loft?" I asked as I ran for the stairwell at the end of the west wing.

"Yep. She's covering Green Team out on the quad and hitting any stragglers that try to make a run toward the dorm at your boys and Derrick."

I shouldered open the door to the stairs. "Cool. Carry on."

The harried stomping of boots reverberated in the stairwell. I had two seconds to register a lanky Alpha, stinking of sour rage and sickening lust, as he barreled down the stairwell, waving a semi-automatic rifle around. I jumped back behind the door.

“I saw you, you fucking cunt!” he shouted. Three shots banged off the metal door. “You’re a dead bitch!”

When he lumbered closer, I kicked the heavy door as hard as I could. It swung open and plowed straight into him. He flailed, the barrel of his gun flying upwards as he loosed an accidental shot above us.

“Fuck!”

Seizing the opportunity, I slipped past the door, raised my gun, and fired a single, focused shot into his head. I wasn’t about to fuck around with a guy carrying an AR-style weapon. He dropped, and I didn’t linger. I ran for the first set of stairs, only to pull up short and smash my body up against the wall as the door to the floor above me crashed open.

“Bud? Shit!”

This one had a pump-action shotgun, and he was no better with it than his now-deceased partner-in-crime was with his weapon. He fired several haphazard shots down the center of the stairwell, the bullets ricocheting off the cement of the ground floor below. After the sound of another pump and reload, I dove back down the stairs as one shot pinged off the wall above my head.

“Stay still, you fucking whore!”

“Bet you still couldn’t hit me if I did, Ace!” I shouted back.

Another three wild shots down the stairwell, then finally the empty click I was waiting for. I sprang to my feet and bolted up the stairs. The shooter disappeared from view, retreating back through the third-floor doorway. I took the remaining stairs two at a time, and I was through the door only seconds behind him.

“Kenny! I need a gun!” Ace shouted as he sprinted down the hall. “Do you have any ammo left?”

I raised my handgun and fired over Ace’s head just to warn Kenny what he was about to get himself into.

“Fuck!” he shouted, throwing his hands up to brace against the debris that fell from the ceiling where my bullet hit.

“No way, man!” another voice shouted. Shoes pounded on the threadbare carpet, and another Alpha stumbled into view. He was tall, thick-bodied, and couldn’t have been more than nineteen or twenty. “I’m not gonna just stay here and put my life on the line for this bullshit! Those motherfuckers aren’t even letting us keep half of the girls *we* find for the cause!”

What the hell did that mean?

Kenny streaked by me, his hands in the air. “Don’t shoot! I’m out. I’m fucking *out*.”

“You fucking pussy!” Ace bellowed.

I lowered my weapon, slowing to a walk, and I let Kenny tuck tail and run for the stairs. “Derrick,” I said, buzzing onto our comms line. “One of the guys guarding the girls is running out of here like a chickenshit. Watch for his exit on the center stairs.”

“Got it. I’ll snag him,” Derrick replied. “You good?”

“Yeah. Three guards. One down, one running, and the last one is out of ammo. I’m going to have fun with him.”

“Fine, but make it quick—Cam! What the fuck, man? I had that one.”

I could just make out a grunt and then a yelp of pain in the background.

“Don’t make that face—it doesn’t work on me like it does your boyfriend and his brother,” Derrick said. A pause. “No, you can’t talk to Bl—to *Dylan*. She’s busy.”

I snorted. “Okay, I’m out. I would appreciate it if you made sure none of the Bryces are seriously injured during all of this.”

“I cannot wait to tell them you said that.”

I rolled my eyes for no one. “*Bye.*”

It was quiet again in the hall. My quarry had stopped running, and the stink of Alpha aggression told me he was lurking somewhere in the vicinity. I had to anticipate how he was going to make his last stand.

Holstering my weapon, I padded silently down the hall, hugging the wall as I reached the corner where the east wing of the dorm’s U-shape jutted from the middle of the building. The pheromones leaking into the air sharpened, an eager anticipation of violence. It singed my nostrils—a clear signal for the normal risk-averse beta to run the other direction.

But I was not normal. For all sorts of reasons.

I paused, holding my breath.

Ace, the big idiot who’d spent all his ammo spraying the stairwell with bullets, jumped around the corner. He swung his empty shotgun like a baseball bat, his meaty hands gripping the barrel as he aimed high, like he expected I’d still have my pistol in my hand and he wanted to knock it free.

I moved quickly, shifting position to catch the stock end of the gun before it could smash into my body.

“Shit!” he barked, wide-eyed as he scrambled to hang on.

I yanked hard with both hands on my end of the gun, jerking him off balance. As he stumbled forward, I smashed my boot right into his big gut, shoving hard as I wrenched the shotgun from his hands. He careened backward, smacking into the wall.

He shook off the hit and paused to glare murder at me. “You think you’re hot shit, huh? Gonna take on an Alpha male with your bare hands? I’ll break your face and then help myself to that tight body. They won’t let us fuck the omegas, but no one gives a shit about beta trash.”

I stared at him. “You do realize we have a small army here eliminating your entire disgusting organization? All that

insanity you hear outside? That's us winning, not your angry little boys club."

His face flushed with rage, and the air turned pungent. "You think you've won? You don't know fucking anything, you dumb bitch."

He shoved off the wall and lunged for me. I ducked the wild fist he swung at my head, and then I sprang up, jamming the heel of my hand right into his chin. His head snapped back, and blood spurted from his mouth. He'd bitten his tongue.

It was now or never.

I dropped, sweeping my leg under him to knock him to the floor. He crashed hard, sprawling out on the blood-spattered carpet. I pounced, finally pulling my gun from my belt again as I straddled his torso. I shoved the muzzle up under his chin, and he froze.

"That's right," I said in a harsh whisper. "This gun doesn't give a fuck who's an Alpha and who isn't. This beta trash can still blow your brains all over this ugly carpet. Tell me where the girls are."

His nostrils flared, but he didn't move. "Last three rooms at the end of the hallway. There's only three left."

"What do you mean there's only three left? There were more?"

"Yeah."

I shoved the muzzle harder into the soft skin under his chin. "And where the hell did the others go? Did you sick fucks force them into a bonding already?"

"We fucking should have!" he spat. "*We* found those girls! They belong to us."

I leaned in to growl in his face. "Where. The. Fuck. Are. They?"

"I don't know! T.R. said our big donors wanted their *cut*."

My blood ran cold. That sounded like there was money—real money—involved here. This was a cancer that had spread

beyond just young, disgruntled Alphas yelling on a Discord server and cosplaying commando in a vacant parochial school.

I gave Ace one last glare, then I smashed the butt of my gun into the side of his head. I hit him twice more just to make sure he was out before I climbed off him. I stood up, kicked him onto his stomach, then secured his arms behind his back with some of the handy plastic cuffs Bryce Solutions had in abundance.

Then I sprinted to the end of the hall.

“Mary Rose!” I shouted as I came to a stop in front of the locked doors of rooms 301, 303, and 304. “It’s Dylan! Are you here?”

The air around the rooms was sickeningly sweet, but the distinct sour note signaled omegas in distress.

“Dylan!” a voice called from behind room 303. The handle jiggled fruitlessly. “I’m in here!”

Relief rushed through me in a torrent. Mary Rose was still here and hadn’t been carted off by the “donors.” She would still be coming off the suppressants, and I’d held onto hope she hadn’t been moved or otherwise forced into a bonding, since the Rileys seemed to think she belonged to them. And we knew the Rileys were licking their wounds as they packed up their shit in a hurry.

I pulled my lockpicks from my belt and made quick work of Mary Rose’s door. Pin, rake, pop the lock. The door swung open, and little Mary Rose launched herself into my arms.

I clutched her. Her black hair fell around her face, and I was relieved she smelled clean—and only a little sweeter than normal. “Are you hurt, Mary Rose? Did they hurt you?”

She shook her head against my vest. “Not really. Scared us a lot. Were kinda rough when we didn’t do what they said with enough enthusiasm. But no one was allowed to hurt us or... you know.”

“Good.”

“They wanted to, though,” she whispered. “We could smell it. They would stand out here and scent us and... it was gross.”

The thought made me nauseous. Those pervs were jacking off outside these scared omegas’ prison cells.

Maybe I’d put a bullet in Ace’s head after all.

“Is Lily here?” I asked.

She shook her head again. “No, they came and took Lily away. And Maria and Cadence. I don’t know if there were others before I got here.”

Shit.

“Hey!” a voice squeaked from behind 301. “Who’s out there? Help me!”

I released Mary Rose and rushed over to pick the lock.

“That’s Emmaline,” Mary Rose told me. “She’s only thirteen.”

I popped the lock and shoved open the door. A thin, blonde girl appeared, wearing the same plain white sweatshirt and little blue shorts as Mary Rose, her big brown eyes wary. Her butter-pecan scent was shockingly pervasive for an omega so young, and her terror had given it a burnt edge. “Are they... are they all gone?”

“You’re safe now, Emmaline,” I said gently. “I’m taking you out of here, and we have a whole team taking care of the bad guys.”

Mary Rose pulled her into a hug. “It’s okay, Emmy. Dylan helps girls like us. You can trust her.”

Emmy eyed me, then gave a tentative nod. “Okay. Let’s get Daniela.”

After I’d unlocked room 304, Emmy and Mary Rose had to go inside to coax Daniela out. They’d found her hiding in the corner furthest from the door, sheltering in her makeshift nest made from the thin cot mattress, sheets, and threadbare quilt they’d been issued in their little prison cells. Daniela was sixteen, had shiny brown hair and freckles, and was blessed

with the voluptuous curves and tiny waist of an ideal omega. Underneath the sour distress, she smelled of raspberry cheesecake, and she was too terrified to say a word.

Once I had my girls corralled, we made our way to the nearby stairwell at the end of the hallway. I led them down, my gun raised. I would blow the head off any stray Alpha who looked at them wrong.

When we hit the ground floor, I paused at the exit door and buzzed onto comms. “Hey, team. I’ve got three girls with me, and we’re about to exit from the east side of the dorm. Are we clear?”

“Yes,” Dad replied. “Daisy’s on the way, and Derrick and the boys are just finishing the dorm cleanup now.”

“Copy.” I shouldered through the door and ushered the girls out into the moonlit courtyard.

Chaos greeted us. Someone had tossed a smoke grenade into the gym, and the militia members who’d been hiding inside streamed out and ran for the gates. A lanky Alpha with a shaved head and bushy beard stumbled out of the dorm courtyard and into view, bleeding from both his mouth and nose. He stared at us, outrage in his wild eyes, and I pointed my gun at his head. He was unarmed now, but I’d end him if he took one step toward the girls.

Instead, he cursed and ran the other direction just as Derrick rounded the corner, cackling as he sprinted after the guy. “Running from me just makes it more fun!”

I motioned for the girls to follow me as we hurried across the lawn. I spared a glance back toward the dorm courtyard and caught Austin slamming two heads together while Seth tossed another guy into the side of the building. Bodies of both the militiamen and the hired security littered the grass, many injured, some dead.

The omegas behind me were growing increasingly distressed. “Dylan!” Mary Rose shouted over the noise of battle. “How are we getting out of here?”

An engine roared, and a flatbed four-wheeler zoomed across our path. It did one donut on the lawn before skidding to a stop right in front of us. Daisy leaned out of the small open cab and shouted, “Get in!”

I jumped into the flatbed in the back, directing the girls to follow me. Once we were loaded, I banged on the top of the cab. “We’re in! Let’s move!”

Daisy revved the engine, but before she could peel out, a sleek figure wearing the Bryce Solutions camo jumped into the passenger seat of the cab.

Spicy, rich citrus hit my nostrils. “Cameron! What are you doing?”

“Helping, Blossom!”

Daisy gunned it, and we hauled ass in the direction of the northwest gate. The *pop pop* of sniper fire sounded, Mom covering our exit from her perch up high in the chapel where she had her Beretta slotted through the narrow lancet window. Glass shattered to our left, and a hired goon came crashing through a ground-floor chapel window and hit the ground hard. Dad stood in the window frame, breathing hard and wearing a smile that said he was enjoying himself immensely.

The gate came into view. It had been cleared by the Bryce teams, and no one remained to impede our path out of here.

An explosion rocked the main academic building off to our right as we passed. A large man with flaming red hair flew from a second-story window as the building went up in smoke behind him. He landed on light feet on the roof of a random Jeep that was parked in front of the building. He stood up, pulled a pistol from his belt, spun, and fired six shots in rapid succession at the horde of uniformed men that burst out of the doors.

I leaned into the cab. “Was that Jericho?”

Cam chuckled. “It sure was. Something always blows up when he’s involved.”

“Badass!” Daisy yelled. The cat ears on her dark beanie flapped in the wind as she whipped us around two bodies

splayed over a log and onto the main road.

“Daisy, don’t take this the wrong way,” Cam shouted into the wind, “but do you even have a driver’s license?”

She scoffed indignantly. “I have a learner’s permit!”

We cleared the gate and zoomed onto the fire road that snaked through the wooded area surrounding the school. The crack of gunshots, the screaming and shouting of men beating each other bloody with their fists, the smoke, and the explosions—all of it faded away, replaced by the chirping of the night bugs and the cars speeding down the highway in the distance.

Our girls huddled together in the flatbed, their scents evening out and their wide-eyed terror replaced by the heavy lids of exhaustion. They must’ve identified Cam as a beta and not a threat, or maybe the beautiful smile he’d given them when he first jumped into the vehicle had been disarming enough.

“Where to now?” Mary Rose asked as Daisy slowed the four-wheeler. Both my truck and my dad’s were parked in the lot at the nearby nature trail.

“We’ll take you home,” I replied. “Are each of you okay to go home, or do you want to stay with us until we can get you to a safe place?”

Emmaline nodded. “I’d like to go home,” she whispered.

“Me too,” said Mary Rose.

I looked at Daniela. She just nodded, hugging her knees.

“Home it is, then,” I said.

Cameron turned around to give me his best puppy dog eyes. He’d taken his helmet off, and the few blond strands that had escaped his messy bun framed his face like a picture. I sighed, shaking my head. I had no strength left to resist that face, and the idea of taking a capable non-Alpha backup on my final errands of the night appealed to me.

“Fine, you can come,” I told him.

He beamed at me. Next to me, Mary Rose whispered,
“Wow.”

Yeah, same, girl. Same.

DYLAN

We left Daisy to catch a ride with Mom, Dad, and Derrick while Cam and I spent the next few hours delivering the girls back into the arms of their desperate and worried parents. Daniela lived with her two Alpha fathers and younger brother in an aging but well-kept apartment complex on the far west side of the City. Emmaline hailed from a pack that sounded as toxic and dysfunctional as the one Dad had been raised in, but she was fortunate to have been adopted by her aunt—an Alpha female—and her aunt’s beta husband several years ago. They lived in a modest mid-century home in a neighborhood just outside of downtown, and they’d been on the verge of trying to adopt Cameron as well before we managed to get out the door.

When we finally parked in front of Grandma Anya’s cozy house in the heart of South Ranch, I took a moment to assess Mary Rose through the rearview mirror. Of the three girls, she’d been the calmest—stoic, even—so I decided to risk a quick chat before I released her to her grandmother.

“Just so you know, Mary Rose,” I began, “Jesse Riley and that whole pack are leaving town. You won’t have to worry about any of them coming around again.”

She blew out a breath. “Good. I can’t believe I was so stupid. I thought Jesse... liked me.”

Cam and I exchanged a look. “I’m sure he did,” I said gently, deciding I would do my best to keep this fourteen-year-old omega’s self-worth from plummeting any further into the

toilet. “It did sound like he wanted you to be his omega, Mary. But he was brainwashed by his brother and that pack about what that should mean.”

“Yeah,” she said, slumping in her seat. “I guess.”

“And from what I hear, Cameron made him pay for what he did.”

She gazed at Cam adoringly. “You did? You beat up an Alpha?”

Cam’s blue eyes sparkled as he gave her a sly grin. “I have a lot of practice beating up Alphas. Just like your girl Dylan here.”

She nodded vigorously. “Dylan’s so awesome. I wanna be like her when I grow up.”

I cleared my throat, suddenly a little uncomfortable. “Right, so, anyway. Is there anything you can tell us about the people you saw when you were at the school? Anything at all you can remember that was said that could help us find Lily and the others?”

I’d updated Dad on the situation with the missing girls. Cam had done the same for his team. In the aftermath of the operation, Rodrigo and Austin had chosen a few unfortunate souls upon whom they’d applied some *pressure*, but no one knew any specifics about who the “donors” were or where the girls were being taken. This T.R. character, the mysterious leader of PRM, was the only one with that information, and he’d been conveniently absent from the premises tonight.

“Not really,” Mary Rose replied. “They had us all doing the same stuff together. Then one day we woke up and three of the girls were missing. We were mostly locked in our rooms except when they let us out for ‘training.’ They’d march us to the dorm lounge and give us lectures about an omega’s purpose while the big meatheads stood around, holding their guns. It was mostly that T.R. guy who talked to us, but sometimes they had older omegas come.”

Gross. It was bad enough for these backwards Alpha men to spew sexist, abusive nonsense, but it was another level of

disgusting when women were complicit in it.

“What did they tell you?” Cam asked.

She shrugged. “The usual brainwashing stuff. Omegas were made to serve the needs of Alphas. We should consider ourselves lucky we were being chosen to bond with packs of *real* Alpha men—that we weren’t going to have the government meddle in our bonding. We were going to *get to* bond early and serve a higher cause. We were to obey our Alphas’ every demand. Blah, blah.”

I stifled a laugh. “At least I don’t have to worry you bought any of that.”

“Nope. And this all just made me remember why I don’t plan to be an omega at all, just like y—”

I coughed again and gave her an urgent look in the rearview. Cam and the guys were aware Mary Rose had been on suppressants, but I desperately needed Mary Rose to refrain from saying anything that might make them aware that *I* was also on them. “Right, about that,” I said quickly. “We’re... low on supplies. Do you have enough to get you through the next few months?”

She darted a glance at Cam, then gave me an understanding nod in the mirror. “I didn’t take my last dose, so I should be good for a little bit.”

Cameron was quiet, and I knew he was absorbing every crumb of this exchange.

“Good. I’ll let Grandma Anya know when I know more about... restocking.”

Speaking of Anya, she’d appeared on the rickety old front porch, a knitted shawl wrapped around her hunched frame as she waited. Mom had called her earlier to let her know we’d found Mary Rose unharmed and that we’d be bringing her home tonight.

“Can I go now?” Mary Rose asked. “Grandma’s waiting.”

“Of course. I’m so glad you’re okay, all things considered.”

“Me too. Thank you for coming for me.” She glanced at Cam, and I caught her blush even in the dim light of the truck’s cab. “Thank you, too, Cam. For, um, helping Dylan.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied. “I’ll always help Dylan, so you call us if you need us, okay?”

When I was satisfied Mary Rose and Anya were safely inside their house, I started the truck and began the drive north toward the city. Cam settled into his seat, closing his eyes and looking serene. “Where am I taking you, Cameron?” I asked. If he thought he was going to fall asleep without giving me directions so that I had no choice but to take him home with me, he had another thing coming.

“Sun City Tower,” he replied lazily. He popped an eye open and slanted me a suggestive look. “I can show you our new place. We have a very nice guest room.”

I bet they had a very nice nest in there, too, just waiting for their OFS princess.

I shoved that thought away along with the sharp pinch of jealousy it elicited. I had no business feeling those feelings when I was the one who had made my own bed.

“Nice try,” I told him. “I will drop you on the curb, and you can find your way up to your fancy penthouse like a big boy.”

“Fine. Next time, Blossom.”

Sure, Cameron. *Next time.*



SUN CITY TOWER was a brand-new condo high-rise that had been erected in the middle of downtown on what was once an old parking lot. The warm gray concrete exterior framed cornflower-blue windowpanes, a few of them glowing eerily from within where a few occupants were still awake. The tower rose to nearly forty stories and was nestled amongst sleek corporate skyscrapers, historic hotels, and one of downtown’s large dedicated green spaces.

Definitely a different vibe than the Palisades for the younger Bryce Pack, but the top-floor penthouse of this shiny new building almost certainly kept them in the luxury to which they were accustomed.

I pulled my truck up to the curb at the back entrance of the tower. Waiting for us there were two large figures wearing dark jackets, their hands casually stashed in the pockets of their sweatpants, puffs of their breaths just visible in the cool night air.

I rolled down my window. Austin leaned in, resting his forearms on my window frame. At the same time, the passenger door opened, and Seth muscled his way into the truck, sliding under Cam and as close to me as he could get without actually being in my seat. Cam chuckled and leaned against the now-closed door, his legs slung over Seth's lap.

I heaved a sigh even as my stomach fluttered happily at them all being here with me, their spicy masculine scents entwining in haze-inducing harmony. "So much for just dropping you off, Cameron."

"We won't keep you long, Firecracker," Austin said. His deep voice stroked down my spine like I was a kitty cat perched in his lap. "Just wanted to check on you. You were fucking amazing today."

The kitty *really* wanted to purr at that. "Thanks," I said, and it came out all breathy and demure instead of offhanded and badass, goddamn it. "You were all very impressive yourselves. Thank you for helping us rescue the girls... the ones that were still there, anyway."

"Anytime, love," Seth said. His sneaky hand had already found its way into one of mine, and he gave me a gentle squeeze. "We're not letting this go either. We will find the others."

Austin leaned in further, his face now inches from mine. He inhaled, and my pulse skyrocketed. Had my scent shifted more? Was I perfuming and didn't know it? The intense adrenaline of a night like this would usually keep the omega smothered, but could she withstand being smashed into the

little cab of my truck with all three of my scent-matched mates?

Austin peered into my face, and I settled as I realized he was giving me “serious talk” vibes and not “I’m going to knot you in the backseat of this truck” vibes.

“We did a sweep of the dorm after you left,” he said quietly. “We found the asshole you took down with your bare hands and left cuffed on the floor—”

“Which is fucking hot, love,” Seth said.

“Mmm, so hot,” Cam agreed.

Austin shot them both a stern look across the cab before he focused back on me. “But we also found the one you shot in the stairwell. Was that... was that your first kill?”

Oh. This was... sweet of him. “Actually, no, it wasn’t,” I replied. I didn’t like to reminisce about my first kill, but I also wasn’t ashamed. I hadn’t hesitated to do it then, and I’d do it again in a heartbeat. “Mary Rose’s grandma used to live next door to this pack of three Alphas, their omega, and their thirteen-year-old daughter who’d just presented as an omega. It was not a happy home. About a year ago, the daughter confided in Grandma Anya that the two Alphas who were not her biological father had started... touching her after she presented.”

The lovely male pheromones that had been swirling languidly around us spiked with aggression, and Austin growled under his breath.

“Anya called us, and Dad, Derrick, and I went one night to retrieve the daughter. When we got there, we found the omega mom screaming and cowering behind a couch while two of her Alphas raged at her. Derrick and Dad dealt with them while I broke into the daughter’s tiny bedroom. I found the third Alpha tearing at her clothes while she pleaded and cried. I put a bullet in the back of his skull.”

Everyone sat with that.

After a moment, Seth said, “Fuck.”

Austin looked pained, but he managed to lift his chin at me and grunt, “Good.”

“Did you take the girl to your center in New Mexico, Blossom?” Cam asked, his voice a sad rasp.

I nodded. “We took both omegas to the Center. They’re doing much better now.”

Austin stared at me for a beat, then he wrapped a large hand around the back of my neck. He tugged me to him and touched his forehead to mine. “You’re pretty amazing, Dylan St. James. I think we should probably let you get to bed.”

He released me and raised an eyebrow at Cam and Seth. They both grumbled.

Seth lifted the hand he still had wrapped around mine and placed a kiss on the inside of my wrist. “Until next time, sweetheart. Don’t get into any trouble without me, okay?”

I grinned. “No promises.”

Cam crawled over his mate and managed to squeeze me in a hug as he leaned across the center console. “Goodnight, Blossom,” he purred against my cheek. “See you soon.”

The two of them extricated themselves from my truck while Austin continued to stare at me, studying me in his way, like I was a deeply interesting puzzle he wanted to solve. I swallowed and managed a nonchalant wave. “Night, Austin.”

“Night, Firecracker. Behave yourself.”

“Not happening.”

He gave a wry chuckle, shaking his head. “Of course not.”

I managed to drive away, the image in my rearview of the three of them standing unmoving on the curb as they watched me go.

When I made it home, I fell into my not-nest and slept for twelve straight hours, my exhaustion overpowering the growing ache between my thighs that reminded me I was on borrowed time.

CAM

The Bryce mansion sat atop one of the highest hills in Bluebonnet Palisades. It was a Spanish-style monstrosity with ten bedrooms, a pool house, a tennis court, a gym, and a fully outfitted command center that functioned as a second base for Bryce Solutions.

When I say I moved in next-door to the Bryce Pack as a teen, what I mean is that my parents' house was fully half a mile down the road from the Bryce property.

We'd arrived at the mansion half an hour ago, because unfortunately for us, even the aftermath of an operation on the scale of the PRM raid was not enough to deter Seth and Austin's parents from demanding we attend dinner tonight with the VanHolt Pack.

It'd taken us all of yesterday and most of today to clean everything up, and we were at a frustrating dead end for leads on where the missing girls had been taken after they'd disappeared from the dorms. Austin's strident declaration that there was still work to be done had fallen on deaf ears, so here we were, forty-eight hours after we'd bulldozed a cult militia and blown up their headquarters, dressed in slacks and sport coats while we sipped cocktails in the Bryces' enormous formal living room.

I was trying not to pout. I'd much rather have been making a casual appearance at *our* gym to catch Dylan's evening workout, but duty called. At least I'd had Seth to help me ride

out the lasting high of the raid and the blue balls I'd developed riding around with Dylan in her little truck for hours last night.

"Those assholes at Titan are hiding something," Andrew said after he'd tossed back a big swig of his drink. He sat in the large armchair across from the loveseat where Seth and I had made ourselves comfortable, his legs crossed and his shiny dress shoe bouncing irritably. "They're pissed we wiped the floor with them and are acting like they had no idea of the true situation at the militia compound."

"Feeling a little vindictive, my love?" Jonathan, the silver-fox surgeon of the group, asked with an amused smile. He was perched in the chair next to Andrew's, leisurely reading something on his tablet while he pretended to ignore the shop talk.

"We hacked their system this morning," Rodrigo added. He lounged on one of the couches, his huge arms thrown over the back. "Their client for this job was a shell company that doesn't appear to actually exist. It'll take a while to unwind it all."

"That's enough of that!" Camille declared as she bustled into the room, heels clicking against the terracotta tile floor. "No work talk tonight. We are having a *nice* dinner."

"The VanHolts aren't even here yet, Mom," Austin pointed out. He sat on the other end of Rodrigo's couch, and he was doing the best job out of the three of us pretending he wasn't sulking, but only barely.

Camille tutted. She wore a vibrant purple cocktail dress that draped lovingly over her ample curves, and her honey-blond hair framed her face in perfect waves that made me just a little jealous. Jericho wafted into the room behind her, wearing a tight black T-shirt and old jeans. I doubted the man owned a suit. His tattoos, more numerous than even Seth's, were on full display, and as usual he hovered near his omega and watched her like a red-haired beast who was five seconds from dragging her back to his lair.

She loved it.

“You boys have all day, every day to discuss your cases,” Camille said, waving a manicured hand at us all. “I never get to see my babies anymore! If you get them talking about work, they’ll never stop, and we won’t get to have family time.”

“Mom, we took you out for your birthday like, three weeks ago,” Seth said. “Remember? You and Cam won the salsa competition. You act like we’ve abandoned you.”

She sniffed delicately. “Excuse me for *missing* my sons.”

“Do you also miss your daughters?” Austin asked, arching a brow. “Where are Isabella and Seraphina? Why aren’t they required to attend this dinner?”

“Isabella is in the Virgin Islands with her pack,” Andrew said. “In case you all have forgotten, they’re expecting your first niece or nephew later this summer, so they are on a little pre-baby vacation.”

Isabella was the oldest Bryce sibling, and the second she graduated OFS, she’d bonded with a pack that included two of her childhood best friends. They were all mild-mannered, bookish kinds of guys who hailed from very old money. We didn’t have a whole hell of a lot in common, but they were obsessed with Isa and treated her like a queen. No notes from me.

“Oh, good for them,” I said, raising my glass. “Isabella owes me lunch when she returns. I won’t let her forget her promise to name the baby Cameron, boy or girl.”

“And Seraphina is hiding upstairs,” Camille added, rolling her big green eyes. “She gave me a lot of lip when I told her to make herself presentable. I worry about her. They wouldn’t dare kick a Bryce omega out of the OFS, but she’ll never match with a good pack if she doesn’t start taking it seriously.”

“Ooh, my ears are burning, Mom,” Seraphina said as she sauntered into the living room, wearing trendy jeans and a Palisades Prep Swim T-shirt that’d seen better days. She was also barefoot. “Keep going. I almost forgot my entire purpose in life in the hour I was out of your presence.”

Seraphina was nineteen and in her first year at the OFS. She had bright red hair, a willowy figure she'd honed on the swim team, and was probably harboring anarchist tendencies. There was little doubt which Bryce Alpha was her biological father, which meant they were lucky she hadn't burned down a building at the OFS in protest yet.

"Sera," Jericho growled. "Do not sass your mother."

"She sassed me first, Jere!"

Seth snickered. "Good to see the OFS hasn't changed you even a little bit, Sere."

She pointed a purple fingernail at him. "And how come my *brothers* get to run around having a real life instead of finding their *match*?"

Seth's smile morphed into a look of betrayal. "Ouch, sis. Same team!"

Camille smiled, shooting the three of us a knowing look. "We are working on that, don't you worry."

"Uh-oh, your mom's plotting," I whispered to Seth.

"She's always plotting."

The doorbell rang. Camille smoothed her dress, pasted on a perfect hostess smile, and hurried away to answer the door. A minute later, she returned, walking arm in arm with an omega woman with pale skin and dark brown hair. She was thin to the point of appearing frail, and her big smile didn't match her sad brown eyes.

Behind them marched a cluster of large Alpha males in their finest suits. The elder VanHolts all had that aging-Alpha look about them, like they used to play football in their glory days but were now a bit thick around the middle. Alpha genetics only went so far in keeping a man strong and fit, and the elder Bryces had worked hard to keep themselves looking like the extreme Daddies they all were. The VanHolts were soft office men who spent their days playing with other people's money.

With them stood their son, Lonnie. He was about my height, a little broader in the shoulders, and muscular enough to be recognized as an Alpha. He had a build that said, “I work out three days a week with my trainer” as opposed to Seth and Austin’s “I throw grown men into walls for a living.” His hair was an unassuming dark blond, stylishly cut, and his pale blue eyes had zeroed in on me the minute he’d walked into the living room.

We all stood up to greet our guests.

“Gentlemen—and Seraphina,” Camille said fondly. “You remember the VanHolts—Richard, Sherman, Victor, Reed, and their lovely omega, Kelli. And, of course, their son, Lonnie.”

“Welcome, everyone,” Andrew said. He and Jonathan motioned the VanHolts over to the bar for a round of drinks. Camille and Kelli disappeared through the large archway that led to the kitchen, dragging a reluctant Seraphina behind them. Jericho slipped away, following silently in their wake.

Lonnie made a beeline for us, and I stifled an annoyed groan.

“Hey, guys,” he said, wearing a broad smile. He dipped his head *just* enough to signal deference to our pack leader. “Austin.”

“Lonnie,” Austin grunted.

“Long time,” Lonnie said. “You three are a hard bunch to nail down for some quality hangout time.”

Seth could barely contain his eye roll. “Some of us work for a living, dude.”

Lonnie’s eager gaze landed back on me at last, and he shuffled in closer. “Hey, Cameron,” he said, his voice softening and his bland, woodsy scent gaining a sweeter note. “How have you been?”

Seth’s annoyance radiated down our bond.

“Fantastic, Lonnie,” I replied. “And yourself?”

“I’m great now. I’ve missed seeing you, Cam.”

I nodded sagely. “It is an affliction most people develop when out of my presence for too long.”

“We didn’t get to talk nearly enough at the hospital charity benefit last summer.”

“Mmm,” I replied. It had certainly been enough for me.

Seth pressed in next to me, wrapping a proprietary arm around my waist. He glared at Lonnie, his all-black suit giving him that edge of danger. His dress shirt was unbuttoned enough to tease a glimpse at the colorful tattoos that decorated his chest, and it was very fucking sexy.

I wished our Blossom was here to see it. She only ever saw us in our work clothes.

“You done flirting with my beta?” Seth asked. “Tone down your pheromones, man. It smells like someone burned cotton candy on a campfire and then drowned it.”

Austin took a huge gulp of his drink.

Lonnie lifted his chin, giving Seth an imperious look. “I think you’d better learn to share, Seth. There will be more members of this pack soon, and Cam has every right to explore his feelings with them.”

“Says who?” Seth growled. “We haven’t discussed adding anyone to our pack in the near future, have we, brother?”

Austin eyed Lonnie over the rim of his glass. “We have not.”

“You need me,” Lonnie said, jamming a finger into his own chest.

“Do we, now?” Austin asked.

“You only have two Alphas. Your best shot at courting the cream of the crop at the OFS is to add a third, especially a VanHolt.”

That might’ve been true for other packs, but our name was Bryce.

And I liked to think I defied my designation, anyway.

Lonnie looked at me again, his pale eyes hungry. “And Cameron and I have something between us.”

I smiled, snuggling further into Seth’s side. “We don’t, sweetheart. But I do understand the desire to manifest it. Truly.”

“And we aren’t in the market for an omega right now,” Austin added. “So it’s a moot point, anyway.”

Lonnie’s face had flushed, and he sputtered, “What do you mean you aren’t in the market for an omega?”

Camille appeared in the living room in the nick of time, clapping her hands in order to be heard over the loud hum of conversation. “Dinner is served, everyone! Please join me in the dining room.”

Lonnie huffed before rearranging his face back into something more pleasing for company. “We’ll discuss this later.”

“No, we won’t,” Seth said.

I chuckled as Lonnie stomped off. “Well, that was entertaining. I can feel you gloating, Sethy. Be nice—his poor little spirit is crushed.”

“He’s an entitled ass,” Seth muttered. “He needed a wake-up call.”

“And I need another drink,” Austin said. “Let’s go get this over with.”



DINNER DRAGGED, but at least the food was tasty. Camille always had these gatherings catered by her favorite French restaurant, and as the waitstaff buzzed around the long banquet table, placing cherry clafoutis in front of each of us, I could finally see a light at the end of the tunnel.

Jonathan had just finished leading a toast thanking the VanHolt Pack for their generous donations to his ongoing research in developing a new method of cardiac surgery in infants. The lot of them were three bourbons and several

glasses of wine in, and the polite conversation began to turn boisterous.

“Ah, you all should consider donating to Domingo Clara’s campaign,” Victor VanHolt said, waving his wineglass in Andrew’s direction. Victor was the leader of Pack VanHolt as Andrew was of the elder Bryces. “He’s spoken at a few events we’ve attended, and we had him out to headquarters the other day. There’s a guy that grasps pack values.”

Andrew slanted a look of warning toward where the three of us sat at the other end of the table. Austin had given him the full debrief of our stint at the PRM rally, including the lovely speech by Mr. Clara, and it appeared he did not want to have that discussion in front of the VanHolts.

Austin returned Andrew’s look with a challenging one of his own, but not a single one of us had the energy or the desire to stir the pot and risk extending this dinner longer than it had already gone.

“Oh really?” Andrew replied airily. “What are we calling ‘pack values’ these days, anyway, Victor? The discourse is always changing.”

“Well, first and foremost,” Victor said, leaning back in his chair, “is the role of the Alpha male, of course. It’s been eroded over the decades by all this women’s lib shit, not to mention the government’s interference in how an Alpha can and should run his pack. Clara gets it, and he knows change starts at the local level.”

“The government would argue that its regulations protect the most vulnerable of our population,” Jonathan said. “Omegas are rare and precious, and a bonding free-for-all can and has ended badly.”

Richard, a paunchy Alpha with graying blond hair and familiar pale blue eyes, scoffed at Jonathan. “Who says the old ways ended badly? Two-plus decades later, we’re in a worsening fertility crisis, and Alpha packs are running around feral with no omega. Crime rates are up. Beta women are too busy taking jobs from beta and Alpha men alike, shirking their

duties in the home. It's giving the omegas the wrong ideas about their purpose in this life."

I glanced at Kelli, their omega. She stared at the wall in front of her, sipping her wine like nothing interesting was happening. Something like pity stirred in my gut.

"And what is their purpose in life?" Seraphina asked. She'd woken from her state of bored endurance of torture and was now a shark that smelled blood in the water. "Do tell. I'm learning all about it at the OFS, but they've stopped short of deeming us the *chattel* of our future Alphas."

"*Seraphina*," Camille said through gritted teeth.

Victor tipped his head back and laughed. "Oh, you all have a live one here, don't you, Andrew? It'll take a special pack to tame her, won't it?"

"Setting aside the private relationship of the omega and her Alphas once they are a bonded group," Andrew said, rubbing his temples. "I'm unclear on the reason for your opposition to the government mandates, Victor. Everyone at this table enjoys very specific exemptions from all of that."

Victor waved a dismissive hand. "Only in that we're shunted toward a different process, Andrew. It's preferable to the USDPS bullshit, sure, but the government is still telling Alphas of *our* caliber where and how to procure an omega. It's unnatural!"

"They'd rather just snatch us off the streets, Dad," Seraphina said. She lifted the crystal glass of whiskey she'd stolen from Seth and took a healthy swig. "Can I have a gun if this Clara psycho gets elected?"

"Sure," Jericho said to Sera at the same time Rodrigo said, "Absolutely not."

"Give me that," Seth hissed, yanking his drink from her hand.

Victor huffed. "Of course that's not—"

"Um, excuse me!" Camille said, hopping to her feet and tapping her fork urgently against her glass. Conversation

ceased, and we all gave her our polite attention. “I think we can set aside our differing opinions on pack politics for a moment because we would *all* agree, at the very least, that Alphas and omegas finding their perfect matches in one another is a beautiful thing. It is on that note that I have exciting news!”

Andrew gave her an encouraging nod, and the VanHolts deflated.

She turned her bright smile to us. Seth’s hand tightened where it had landed on my knee under the table.

“After many days of working *tirelessly* with the OFS, I’m so thrilled to announce that we will be hosting our boys’ official choosing gala in a few short weeks!”

My stomach dropped to the floor.

AUSTIN

“What?” I barked. “Mom? You did this without talking to us?”

“I have been *talking* to you about this for the better part of a year, Austin,” she huffed. “We all have!”

I swung my glare to Andrew. “Dad?”

“We all agreed you three needed a swift kick in the ass,” he said, unrepentant. “You’ve said yourself you’d prefer to bond with an omega your own age. If that’s the case, the time is now. You’re getting older, but the girls at the OFS will stay the same age.”

“It really will be a boon to your pack,” Jonathan added gently. “You boys are in a rough line of work. You need an omega for balance. To soothe your jagged edges.”

“And I’ve told you we won’t keep paying for your place on the courting roster,” Andrew added. “It is astronomically expensive.”

“No,” Seth said, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at Andrew. “Cancel it.”

Mom’s chin wobbled, and she sniffed. “Why aren’t you excited? *Every* Alpha wants to find his omega. Why don’t you?”

Now we were getting the glare of death from Jericho. “You’ve made your mother cry.”

“We just don’t appreciate these sorts of *monumental* decisions being made without us!” I thundered. “Cancel it.”

“You’re not understanding,” Andrew snapped. “Once you set an official date for your choosing gala with the OFS, there is no canceling it. They will remove you from the roster and ban you from courting any OFS omega *for life*.”

“*What?*” all three of us said at once.

The VanHoltz were just watching this play out like it was an entertaining TV show. I wanted to punch someone.

“They take their courting roster very seriously,” Jonathan replied. “A toe out of line means your pack isn’t serious about their girls. They’ll cut you for less.”

“Canceling this gala means you’re going into the USDPU system to wait in line for who knows how long for a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old omega to come up for matching,” Andrew said. “Think about that.”

“What if we hold the gala but refuse to choose someone?” Seth asked.

“Same result,” Andrew said, the words slashing like a whip. “It’s literally never happened in the history of the OFS system. Why would it?”

“What if we choose an omega to court but decide not to bond with her?” I asked.

My mom gasped, and even Kelli VanHoltz stirred from her daze to look horrified. “That is a terrible thing to suggest!” Mom shrieked. “Think of that poor girl! Her reputation would be *ruined*.”

I sucked in a deep, calming breath. I glared at each one of my parents, all of them complicit in this betrayal. They looked utterly shocked and confused—except Rodrigo. He studied me, eyes narrowed, suspicion clear.

He’d been the most involved with the St. James family during the whole PRM operation, so he knew firsthand how incredible their daughter was. He probably also hadn’t missed

the oppressive energy I'd broadcasted through our entire HQ whenever she was brought up.

It didn't make much sense, but I couldn't deny she was the biggest reason this felt so *wrong*.

At least Seraphina had the decency to appear pissed off on our behalf.

"Look," I said, reining in the aggression. "This is a discussion the three of us need to have alone, if you don't mind." I looked at Victor VanHolt. "It was nice to see you all. If you'll excuse us."

The VanHolts stood up, all of them smug and amused at our plight. "Of course. It's time we head home. Thank you for a lovely dinner. Wonderful, as always, Camille."

They gathered to leave, and my dads stood to shake their hands and bid them goodbye. Lonnie leaned across the table and gave us a conspiratorial smile. "Think about what I said. You'll need another Alpha. I know those girls—they all act so prim and proper, but they're still just fucking hungry for knots."

"Lovely," Cam said. My heart cracked at how emotionless he suddenly sounded.

The VanHolts left the room, escorted out by Jonathan and Andrew. Mom sat in her chair across the table, shoulders slumped, eyes glistening. She looked imploringly at Cam. "Cameron? I thought you would at least be on my side about the choosing. You've been so excited to find a lady."

He mustered a smile for her. "I know you've done this out of a place of love, Camille. It's just... the timing. We aren't in the right place for this at the moment."

She sniffled. "Well, I hope you all change your minds."

I ushered my pack out of the dining room and up the stairs. No one spoke until I'd slammed the door to my old bedroom and locked it behind me.

Seth shucked his suit jacket and paced the carpeted floor like a caged animal. Cam sat down on the end of the bed,

dropped his elbows to his knees, and hung his head in his hands.

I leaned against the closed door, banging the back of my head against it in frustration. Then I looked at my brothers—my poor, distraught brothers.

I had to fix this.

“I know this sucks,” I told them. “To have what may be the most important decision we make in our lives just... taken from us. By our parents, who love us.”

“Yeah, it fucking does,” Seth spat. “How dare they?”

“I don’t know what they were thinking,” I said. “Or maybe I do, I don’t know. We’ve always known this was our future. We wanted it, sure, maybe in the next couple of years. But we all know the reason facing this decision *now* is hitting us so hard.”

“Dylan,” Cam said.

“Dylan,” Seth agreed.

“A beta,” I reminded them. “Who we’ve known for exactly ten days.”

Cam raised his head to glare at me—a look that so rarely crossed his face that it was like he’d punched me in the gut. “That doesn’t diminish anything. She’s special. And ten days is a lot fucking longer than we’d know whatever poor girl we’d *choose* at this gala.”

I sighed. “Not if we try to attend a lot of OFS stuff between now and then.”

Fuck, I hated that idea.

“No.”

“Yes, Cameron.”

“I know you both feel something for Dylan!” Cam barked. He looked at Seth, his big blue eyes pleading. “*Please*, Sethy. I don’t want anyone else.”

“She doesn’t want us, Cameron!” Seth kicked the doorframe of my closet in anger, and then he collapsed into my old desk chair. “You were there. She looked *scared* of us. She *ran* from us. She hates packs, and she doesn’t fuck Alphas. Her stance on that is, like, *legendary* in Merchant Village.”

“She doesn’t hate *our* pack, Seth,” Cam spat back. Fuck, it *killed* me to see them argue. “She likes us. We like her. We all know it.”

Seth’s face was terrible. “Even if she did want us, it’s not fair to her, Cam. It’s not fair to her or to us.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you about our feelings for her, Cameron,” I said. I felt like my insides were crumbling into dust. “But what are we supposed to do? Give up our slot at the OFS forever to try to convince Dylan to, what? Be our bonded beta?”

He raised his chin in defiance. “Yes.”

“And if she says no? Or we convince her to date us for a little while and she decides pack life isn’t for her after all?”

He slumped. “Then we’re bonding a teenager from the USDPU registry if we ever wanted to find our omega.”

Seth and I shared a look. I knew, deep down, there was only one path here. He and I would be fighting the same irrefutable demands of our biology.

It sucked, but it was reality.

Seth stood up and approached Cam. He kneeled in front of him and took Cam’s hands in his, staring imploringly into his eyes. “I can’t lie to you, Cam. I do want to bond with an omega. I’ve always wanted it. I can’t fight what I am.”

“Nor can I,” I added. “I’ve never pictured my life without an omega at its center. And now it’s something I want to have with both of you. Your love for each other makes me happy, but I want to share in that kind of love for our omega with you.”

Cam blew out a shaky breath, then he gave my brother a soft smile. “I know. It’s not fair of me to ask you two to... forgo what your Alpha natures *need*. I want this pack to be happy and balanced just as much as you do.”

“I’m so sorry, Cam,” Seth whispered.

“Don’t be.”

I moved to sit on the bed next to Cam, and I placed a hand on his shoulder. “And ultimately, I’m not sure what we all thought we were doing with Dylan in the first place. Choosing gala bullshit aside, what if we just kept seeing her and things started happening and then we’re all kind of dating and then eventually, someday down the road, Seth and I still just can’t shake that intrinsic... desire? Our baser instincts are telling us we still need *more*? Then we’re tossing Dylan aside. She doesn’t deserve that.”

“No,” he said. “She doesn’t.”

“So,” I went on. “We’re going to do the right thing. We’re going to tell my mom that we will go into our choosing gala with the best intentions. We’ll open our minds and our hearts to finding an omega female that fits with us. We’ll give her the world and spoil her rotten. We’ll fuck her brains out and knot her until she is so delirious with pleasure that she can’t even remember her own name. We’ll have a bunch of kids, and we’ll dump them on our parents often as penance for their actions tonight.”

They both chuckled at that. I could feel the mood turning from despondent to tentatively hopeful.

Which made it even harder to say what I needed to say next.

“We have to let Dylan go,” I said softly. “We can’t see her again. It’ll be too hard on all of us, and it won’t be fair to her or the omega girls we’ll need to get to know.”

Cam went rigid beside me. “No. *No*, Austin. I have to see her again, even to just say goodbye.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Seth climbed onto the bed and wrapped his arms around Cam. “He’s right, babe. I don’t know how any of us would begin to say goodbye, and I worry if I see her again, I’ll lose my resolve.”

Cam sagged into Seth, defeated once again. “Fuck!” he bellowed into Seth’s shirt.

“I know,” Seth murmured. “I hate it too. But maybe this is a good thing, like Austin said. I hate the idea of us ever breaking Dylan’s heart.”

“Yeah,” Cam replied. “I don’t want to do that to our Blossom.”

The idea of hurting Dylan made me want to throw myself into traffic. There was just no way around it—I wanted what every Alpha wanted, and so did my brother. Cameron wanted what Seth wanted, and he also wanted what was best for the pack.

Dylan wasn’t that, nor did she want to be.

It was time for the three of us to stop living in fantasyland. I could only hope this feeling like my heart was being carved from my chest would abate—and soon.

Goodbye, Firecracker.

I’ll fucking miss you.

DYLAN

It had been two weeks.

Two fucking weeks since I'd left the Bryce Pack standing on the curb in front of their fancy condo tower, and I hadn't seen them since. I hadn't received a text message or even an email—not that I'd ever given them my info, but Cameron would've been able to figure it out if they'd really wanted.

A few days of silence I could chalk up to being busy with the investigation. We had missing omegas to find, and Bryce Solutions was leading the charge. Dad had heard from Rodrigo once for a brief check-in, but that was it. No news, no boys.

But as the days wore on, I knew. And when Cam didn't seize the opportunity to come into the store to pick up the hammock he'd ordered after Daisy had sent him both an email and a text informing him of its arrival a week ago, I *really* knew.

They were gone.

I should've been relieved. I hadn't wanted them, had I? Well, I had. I'd wanted them as friends, as *men*, as partners in saving our girls. But I hadn't wanted the boatload of baggage and the shackles that came with the discovery of what I was and who I was to them.

I didn't want to *be* an omega, did I? Not even theirs.

But as my body rebelled, barreling ever closer to immolating in a blaze of omega pheromones, I felt my heart

cracking open along with it.

I was woman enough to admit it'd been nice when I thought the Bryces liked me. For *me*. I'd take it to my grave, but there'd been this fantasy playing out in the darkest little recesses of my mind where I got my suppressants and I stayed a beta forever and they *still* wanted me.

So now I missed them, for better or worse. I missed Cam's sunshine and his smile, Seth's sweet mischief and his sexy, dangerous air, and Austin's unwavering devotion to the people and things he cared about.

But I was also in fucking emergency maneuvers mode. Mom had banned me from the floor of the store yesterday because I was starting to really smell *ripe*. Federico had even given me a "*Woah, easy there, mocha latte*" when he'd come by the house to drop off the shipment of birth control pills he'd managed to procure as an apology for his continued inability to find us a new suppressant supplier.

I was also waking up most mornings with a base layer of sweat and panties damp with slick leakage, so I was about to be fucked if I didn't do something drastic.

And that was how Derrick and I ended up dressed and ready for a Saturday night "informal all-university mixer" that was being held on the grounds of the Omega Finishing School. One of Kade's clients at the gym was a student at the local public college, and he'd informed them that tonight was one of the few nights a year the OFS opened its gates to other college students in the area. It was a concession the school had made a few years ago when some of the more forward-thinking OFS families wanted their precious daughters to have a few, fleeting moments of a "real college experience."

So, we would be attending this mixer, and I was going to steal me some of those special heat-blocking suppressants, legal only when dispensed by an OFS for its students. Then I was going to hole up in our apartment and do work for Dad's business until Feddy or the source Marina was now working for the Center came through.

And I was going to put the Bryces out of my mind. It was a lovely week we had, all the violence and destruction aside, but time would go on.

It had to.

“Ack, you smell ridiculous,” Daisy said, waving her hand in front of her face. She was sitting on the couch next to where I’d just finished lacing up my high-top sneakers.

“Does it pass, though?” We’d doused me in the special perfume betas wore to enhance their natural scents—usually to appeal to Alphas.

“Yeah, I think so,” she replied. “You definitely smell like a chocolatey coffee, but it’s got that harsh chemical edge to it now. I think everyone will assume it’s fake *eau de omega*.”

Derrick waltzed in, wearing his dark jeans, boots, a tight Henley that showed off his muscular chest, and a micro-puff black vest. Somewhere under there would be a weapon or two. “Yeah, you smell like you’re trying real hard to bait an Alpha. Good enough for tonight.”

I pointed an accusing finger at him. “Those are your hookup clothes. None of that shit—this is business.”

“If you guys would just let me *come*,” Daisy whined, “I would cockblock the crap out of Derrick. Easy, peasy.”

Derrick scowled at her. “No.”

“This is bullshit,” she replied, crossing her arms over her chest in a huff. “You both know I could be helpful tonight.”

“Dase,” I began in my most placating tone. “We understand that on the spectrum of illegal activities you have engaged in with Derrick and me, underage drinking at a college party barely registers. But... I think Derrick and I would both feel better if we weren’t having to keep horny college dudes from creeping all over you so we can focus on the burgling.”

Derrick grunted in agreement. “What she said.”

“I can take care of myself,” she protested. “I’ll bring my knife.”

“Still no,” Derrick replied.

Daisy flopped dramatically onto the couch cushions. “Ugh, this house is a frickin’ *prison!*”

“Okay then.” I stood up, zipped up the fleece vest I wore over a cropped sweater, jeans, and my sneakers. “We’ll just be going. Tell Dad we’ll call if he needs to spring me from jail later.”



AS DERRICK PARKED his truck in the visitor parking lot at the base of the rolling hills of the OFS campus, I craned my neck to get a good look at the school’s facade. I’d only ever viewed it from afar on my drives in and out of the city, and I had to admit, the English-Gothic architecture surrounded by lush greenery—somehow both lush *and* green even in the dead of the Texas winter—was very *fairy tale*.

We hiked up the sidewalk that ran alongside the entry road, both paths winding their way up to the front gates. Dozens of other students our age were making the same journey, many of them gawking at the looming building before us.

The main academic building was greystone and rose five stories above the hill, its sloping roof framed by two cylindrical towers, a cluster of spires positioned on each like a cake topper. Slender pointed-arch windows spanned several floors, and extending from either side of the building was a covered walkway, soft yellow lighting illuminating its wide, arched openings. The walkways led to other classroom buildings that flanked the main structure and formed the largest academic quad.

We’d studied the campus layout before we left. The small cluster of dorms made up its own quad on the west side of campus and would be a short hike from the main building. All I needed to do tonight was pick an omega pocket for an ID, casually ghost the party to make a quick stop over to the dorm, and pick the lock on the dorm room of my choice. I’d raid as many medicine cabinets as I needed to avoid Heatmageddon 2.0.

Derrick and I flashed our fake city public college IDs at the security guard working the front gate. We were waved along and directed to follow the current of visitors through the open double doors of the main building. We wandered through an ornate foyer, past grand staircases rising to either side of us, and a lounge that looked like it belonged in a five-star hotel and not a college, then we exited again through the back doors and onto a spacious stone patio.

Here was the party. Several small tents had been erected on the patio, twinkling fairy lights strung under their awnings. Bars were set up to serve drinks from under a few of the tents. A DJ played upbeat music from another.

Pretty omega girls stood in clusters of three or four, each in designer coats and shoes that cost more than my monthly salary as they eyed the rest of the partygoers with expressions ranging from curiosity to boredom to mild distaste. At least a hundred other students milled around the patio and out onto the sprawling lawn—a lot of men, both Alpha and beta alike, but I was relieved to see I wasn't the only non-omega female who'd come to the party to gawk at the campus and imbibe the free booze.

“Is that a fucking reflecting pool?” Derrick asked with an incredulous snort.

“Yep.” In the middle of the vast courtyard was a large, rectangular pool, its tranquil waters reflecting the blur of the starry sky shrouded by wispy winter clouds. “Let's hope one of these interlopers gets blitzed and goes streaking through it later. Think of the pearl-clutching.”

Derrick snickered. “I'd pay to see it.”

We began a slow meander through the crowd. As usual, Derrick drew the attention of the females in the vicinity like a magnet. Some of the omegas we passed stared at him like they were starving and he was a tasty feast they knew they'd never be able to eat.

“Any of these lovely ladies doing it for you?” I asked him.

“Nah,” he said with a shrug. He meant it too. “Don’t get me wrong, the scents are fucking killer, but pampered princess isn’t really my type.”

We located Kade and the rest of Derrick’s besties on the lawn just beyond the edge of the patio. They stood around one of several stone firepits, its low orange blaze giving off just enough heat to cut through the chill of the early March evening.

“Boys.” I greeted them with a nod. “Here to huff the sweet smells of pedigreed omega?”

Baron tipped his beer to me. “You never know. Maybe one of them will decide they want to slum it with us for the night.”

He was joking, but I supposed it wasn’t impossible for an unbonded omega to casually hook up with an Alpha. It would take an actual *mountain* of trust if the omega didn’t want to be bitten and bonded in the heat of the moment, so it was definitely not the norm.

Baron nudged Ryan with his big arm. “This guy might get lucky. I’ve heard the more progressive ones that don’t believe in saving themselves for their pack will fuck a beta. Much lower risk.”

Ryan waggled his eyebrows at me. “I’d still pick you over one of these soft, sweet-smelling ladies any day, Dyl.”

“Can it, Casanova,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I’m going to get a drink.”

I slanted a look at Derrick, and he dipped his head in the barest nod. It was time to get what we came for, and he’d keep an eye and ear out while I worked.

I wound my way through the crowd and back toward one of the bars. Along my travels, I clocked a few packs of Alpha males who had that moneyed air—the ones who hailed from the richest packs in the state and were here to actually find an omega to court. They moved like small platoons from target to target, focused and also very horny, if the stray pheromones I managed to catch in the air were any indication.

I reached the bar and slipped in behind a group of omega girls who were chattering excitedly and sipping champagne from flutes that did not appear to be plastic.

“Yikes, trying a little hard there, aren’t you?” one of them said to me as I brushed up against her, pretending to be gunning for the bartender’s attention. Her voice dripped with disdain.

I glanced at her. “You talking to me?”

She was gorgeous, this bitch, with sleek black hair, smooth, unblemished skin, and almond-shaped green eyes. She stood at my height, but she also wore knee-high boots that gave her at least five extra inches. “Yes, I’m talking to you,” she replied, glancing at her friends and rolling her eyes like she was dealing with the dumbest of dumb-dumbs. “You reek of desperation. I’ll never understand why beta girls stoop to just being a hole for an Alpha to stick his dick in while he bides his time waiting for his *true* mate.”

Oh, she was referring to the disaster that was my scent at the moment. Score one for me that even this omega wasn’t spotting the hasty patch-job we’d done with the perfume.

I shrugged, unbothered. “What can I say? I like a *big Alpha cock* in my slutty hole. I totally understand if you’re jealous I get to sample all the Alpha dick I want while y’all are stuck up here in this fancy castle only dreaming about it.”

“Ugh, like we’d be jealous of a vulgar whore like you.”

One of her friends patted bitch-face’s arm. This one was tiny, blonde, and looked like a pin-up girl. “Save your energy, Jacqueline. The beta girls will always wish they could have what we have. We should feel sorry for her, really.”

I just stared at her, incredulous. I knew this echelon of society lived in its own little world and was probably a bit out of touch, but this kind of blew my mind. They really thought that betas of the real world were jealous of the omega girls who were forced to put themselves on a list to be auctioned like cattle to a pack of Alphas before they were eighteen years old?

“Hey ladieeeeees, what’s going on over here?” A new girl butted her way into the group, a flask in a hand that bore the giant Sharpie-ed X of an underage attendee and a cup of soda in the other. “Are you harassing our friends who just want to come hang out and party with us? They’ll never come back again if you show them what kind of cunts you really are.”

“Sera, what in God’s name are you wearing?” the blonde one asked, turning up her nose.

Sera grinned, gesturing to her outfit, which was definitely a sparkly purple sweatshirt-plus-sweatpants onesie. “You like? All the fancy packs are gonna want a piece of this after tonight.”

Well, at least one of the omegas in this place was cool as shit. I slid the student ID I’d snaked from Jacqueline’s purse into my pocket, and then I began to slowly back away while they continued to snark at each other.

“Hey, wait up.” Sera grabbed my hand, tugging me past the bar and into the grass off to the side of the patio. “Sorry about them. Don’t think too poorly of us—it’s about fifty-fifty on who’s tolerable in this place.”

“No apology necessary,” I replied.

She stuck out a hand. “Seraphina.”

I shook it. “Dylan.”

Her blue eyes widened in shock. “Dylan St. James?”

I squinted at her. “Yes?”

She let out a little gasp-y squeal of excitement. “Oh my fucking God, *the* Dylan St. James?”

“Um....”

“You’re, like, my hero! Sorry, sorry—I’m Seraphina Bryce, and I may or may not have eavesdropped on the meetings for the job my dads and brothers did to save the kidnapped omegas a few weeks ago. It was so fucking *cool* to hear there was a girl going in and doing the rescue, and I’ve definitely asked if I could meet you, but my brothers said no. Which I don’t get because they seemed like *super* all about

you for a minute there, not, like, *obviously*, but a sister can tell, you know? Honestly, fuck them, because here you are! I am going to rub this in their faces. What's your Instagram? I'm going to follow you on your adventures."

She sucked in a breath, grinning from ear to ear. I could only gape at her, my instant feelings of kinship with this girl clashing with the anger and sadness swirling in me again at the mention of her brothers.

And then it was my turn to gasp as a sharp pain lanced my body. A searing cramp burst in my abdomen like a bomb, and I clutched my stomach.

Sera's eyes went even wider and her nostrils flared. "Oh, wow. Um... did you just... perfume?"

"Oh fuck, did I?" I whispered. The cramp receded as quickly as it had arrived, only an echo of the pain remaining. Moving fast, I grabbed Seraphina and dragged her further into the trees and away from the party.

"Yeah, friend," she said as we came to a stop, looking me up and down with intense curiosity. "You did. But it's dissipated now, don't worry."

Thank fuck. That was definitely not how my heat had started last time, and I'd been optimistic I still had at least a week before it hit.

I didn't know what the hell was going on, but I did know I needed to get those heat blockers *now*.

"Please don't say anything," I begged her. "I'm just here to... borrow some of those special heat suppressants from you guys. I'm desperate—I *cannot* go into heat again. Or, you know, go to jail."

She nodded vigorously. "No, I get it. I'm actually a little jealous you were able to make this choice for yourself. Your secret is safe."

"I'm one of the very few lucky ones," I replied. "Okay, so I snatched that bitch Jacqueline's ID, and I'm headed to the dorms to find what I need."

Sera held up a hand, using the other to pull her own ID from the pocket of her onesie. “Take this and go to the natatorium. I’m on the swim team, so I have after-hours access. I have a whole fucking stock of heat blockers in my locker there. Number 202, combination is 112233. Don’t look at me like that—I know it’s a piss-poor combo, but I don’t keep anything in there I care about.”

Hell yes. Tonight was going to go my way after all.

“You are a lifesaver,” I said. “Thank you.”

Her smile was conspiratorial. “I’m not really that into *rules*, per se, and I’m happy to lend you something you should have access to in a fair world. Come on—I’ll walk you back through the party. The natatorium is on the east side of campus.”

She linked arms with me, our scents clashing together in a muddle. I took a moment to thank the universe she didn’t share the same cinnamon as her brothers—she was a sweet boozy cherry, and it matched her personality and her flame-red hair.

We hadn’t made it a few steps into the party crowd when a flock of omega girls accosted us.

“Sera! Ohmigod, there you are!”

“Did you see them? Your brothers are here!”

“Can you introduce me?”

“It is so exciting they finally set a date for their choosing gala! Only a few weeks!”

“No wonder they’ve finally decided to come to our events. God, they’re so hot, even their beta. Swoon.”

Every excited utterance was a little dagger to my heart.

Seraphina huffed in annoyance and waved her free arm around. “Be gone, you thirsty bitches!”

“Sera, come on! Be a team player. They’re the hottest pack here!”

“What’s... what’s a choosing gala?” I whispered in her ear even though I was pretty sure I knew exactly what it was.

“It’s a big fucking shindig where an Alpha pack chooses the OFS omega they’ll court and eventually bond.”

Oh, it hurt—the roar of possessiveness, the deep burn of jealousy, the physical recoil from the slap of betrayal—things I *knew* I had no business feeling but did nonetheless.

In the week we’d had together, I’d made my choice.

Apparently, so had they.

Seraphina batted the omegas away like gnats. I kept my head down, having no desire to see or be seen by the Bryce Pack, wherever they were as they chatted up their potential *mate*.

Sera gave my arm a sympathetic squeeze as we soldiered onward. There was no way she hadn’t felt me stiffen at all of that... *news*.

“I... am understanding some things now,” she whispered. “I’m sorry, Dylan.”

“Don’t be. It is what it is.”

“Mm-hmm, sure.”

As we hit the lawn on the east side of the party, I released her arm. I put on my business face and gave her a cheery salute. “I owe you, girl.”

And then I slipped into the night.



I SLAMMED Sera’s locker door closed, humming “Getaway Car” as I stashed the bottle of pills inside my vest. Easiest heist ever—though it really stopped being a heist the minute the person I was stealing from handed me the keys and gave me her express permission to take her shit.

The irony that it was Seth and Austin’s little sister who’d helped me out of this jam wasn’t lost on me.

I dug for my phone, intending to message Derrick that my trip to the pool was a success and that it was time to get the fuck out of here, when another debilitating cramp slammed into me like a Mack truck. I fell to my knees on the carpeted floor, and I clutched my belly, bracing against the pulsing stabs.

My vision swam, but it was from the excruciating pain. This didn't feel like the brain fog of a real heat, or the low, simmering burn of *need, need, need* that became unbearable once it was clear to my body that the need would be unmet. This was someone lighting a Molotov cocktail and tossing it directly into my womb.

I crawled to the corner of the locker room and curled into a ball. I shut my eyes, and I couldn't do anything except will it all to stop.

SETH

The omega clinging to Cam's arm was pretty and smelled delicious, but I couldn't muster even a little bit of excitement to be talking to her or to even be at this stupid party in the first place.

"So you see, two of my fathers know your father, Jonathan, very well," the omega—*Piper? Penelope?*—gushed to Austin and me while she continued to fondle Cameron. "Papa Elliot is the most renowned cardiothoracic surgeon in all of Texas, and Daddy Peter is on the hospital's board of directors. I'm sure we've all crossed paths at the charity balls before, but my fathers were just so thrilled to hear Jonathan Bryce's sons were holding their choosing during my final year at the OFS. If you ask me, it's fate!"

"We'll certainly have to mention to Jonathan that we met you," Austin replied diplomatically.

"Indeed," Cam said with a beautiful smile that only Austin and I would be able to tell was fake as shit. His self-loathing was blaring down our bond as he gracefully extricated himself from her claws and gave her a little bow. "Thank you for the stimulating chat, Miss Piper."

Her cherry-red lip jutted out into a pout. "Oh, but we have so much more to discuss to get to know each other—"

Seraphina appeared behind Piper like a specter, jump-scaring the omega enough to have her wobbling in her high heels. "Beat it, Pipes."

"But—"

“Scram! I need to talk to my brothers.”

Piper glared at her, and then she turned and stalked off toward the bar.

“Hey, Sere-bear,” Cam said. “Thanks for the save.”

“And what in the world are you wearing?” Austin asked.

I chuckled as I took in her purple sweatsuit-thing. She’d tucked the end of the pants into Ugg boots, and her wild hair was in a bun on top of her head. If Mom could see her now—at this party where there were courting Alphas in attendance—she would experience a cardiac event.

Lifting the bottle of beer I’d been nursing to my lips, I let my gaze wander around the perimeter of the stone patio, thankful that Sera’s presence would repel other omega girls for at least a few blissful minutes.

I froze as I locked eyes with a familiar face I had not expected to see on the fucking OFS campus.

“Derrick’s here,” I announced.

Something like shame curdled in my gut.

“Oh shit,” Austin whispered. “He looks... really fucking pissed off.”

He definitely did. Kade, the owner of the gym we were no longer members of, had his hand on Derrick’s chest like he was holding him back. Derrick appeared to be five seconds away from stalking over here to commit murder, and I couldn’t say I blamed him.

“Good, I think I will let him kill me,” Cam announced like he was telling us he’d decided to have wine instead of beer this evening. “It would be preferable to this torture.”

“Ugh!” Seraphina barked, stomping her boot in the grass. “That is what I came to tell you, you dumb jerks! I ran into Dylan—who is my new best friend, by the way, and you will not be keeping me from her any longer—and I was with her when your adoring fans rushed me to talk *all* about your stupid choosing gala.”

My stomach dropped to my fucking feet.

“Shit,” Austin said, turning to give me a pained look.

Cam’s shoulders drooped, and it cut me to my core.

“Yeah,” Sera went on. “Right now I am choosing being a good sister over being a good friend when I tell you that she seemed a little upset by this news, and I gave her my ID so she could escape to the pool.”

Cam took off running without a word.

Austin watched him go. “Okay, I guess that decision is made.”

“The universe is giving us an opportunity to explain ourselves to her,” I told him. “We should take it.”

He didn’t need more convincing. He ran after Cam, and I turned to follow.

“Thanks, Sere!” I shouted over my shoulder.

She looked... way smugger than I thought the situation warranted. “You’re welcome!” she shouted back, then I thought I heard her mutter, “You will owe me for one million years after this.”



CAM HAD to scale the side of the natatorium and break in through one of the windows near the roof, but after a few minutes, he let us in through the front doors.

“Dylan!” I called out, my voice reverberating around the cavernous empty room. The dark pool was still, its waters undisturbed, and the smell of chlorine was heavy in the air. It invaded my nostrils and wiped away the lingering memories of the omegas we’d talked to this evening.

Good.

“Blossom!”

“Where is she?” Austin asked, bewildered. “Do you think Seraphina was fucking with us?”

I stalked around the pool, a bloodhound on the hunt. Now that we'd been gifted this one last chance to see her, I would not let it slip through my fingers.

A whimper sounded from behind the closed door of the women's locker room.

Instinct took over, and I bolted through the swinging door, Austin and Cam hot on my heels.

I stumbled as the world's most *divine* omega perfume slapped me in the face and smashed the reset button on my entire life.

Rich coffee.

Silky chocolate.

Sweet, decadent cream.

Brown sugar.

Cake.

Mine, mine, mine.

My body shook. I gulped huge lungfuls of air. Austin was rigid next to me, his nostrils flaring and pupils blown wide.

Cam darted in front of us, his back to Austin and me as he threw his arms out wide, holding us back from converging on the source of that universe-ending perfume.

"Oh, Blossom," he said softly.

Dylan sat in the corner of the locker room, hugging her knees to her chest. She'd dumped a bunch of clean pool towels into a pile around her. Her fists clenched and her jaw ground like she was in tremendous pain.

Pieces clicked together in my brain at the speed of light.

Dylan's father was an Alpha.

Dylan had access to illegal hormone suppressants that they gave to the girls they helped to hide their omega designations.

Dylan told Mary Rose their supply was low.

Dylan's scent had enticed us more than any beta's ever had.

Dylan was perfuming, right here in this locker room.

Dylan was an *omega*.

Dylan's omega perfume knocked my soul from my body. No human I'd ever smelled on this earth compared.

Dylan was *our* omega.

But Dylan was in distress. Something was wrong. We were her Alphas, and we had to fucking *fix it*.

She looked up at us, anguish in her beautiful hazel eyes. Her own instincts pushed her to look for my brother—our pack leader.

“Austin, I... I don't know what's happening to me. This isn't like last time.”

“Firecracker,” he croaked. “Can I... can I come to you?”

She gave a tentative nod.

Cam swung around to face us, a clear warning in his eyes as he looked directly at Austin. “Do. Not. Fuck. This. Up. Do not touch her unless she asks you to. Do not scare her away. Do not lose your head, or I will strangle you with my bare hands.”

Austin glared at him, his instincts riding him like a fucking racehorse, but he managed a curt nod. “I'm in control, Cameron. Let me go to her.”

Cam released Austin, who made it to Dylan in two long strides. He dropped to his knees in front of her and then gently cupped her face in his big hands.

I'd never been so jealous in my life, but this was right. He was supposed to lead. I clung to Cameron, needing to ground myself, and we both took a small step closer to them.

“Are you going into heat?” Austin asked her, his soft and decidedly calm voice a minor miracle.

She shook her head. “No... no, I had a heat once, and this doesn’t feel like that. Sharp cramps. Stabbing pain. Not the slow burn and, um... *very* desperate need. This came much faster—out of nowhere.”

Austin peered into her face. He knew he held a treasure in his hands. “Are you lucid?”

She bobbed her head in his hold. “Yes. That’s how I know it’s not a real heat.”

“This is a heat spike, baby girl,” Austin told her. “If you haven’t been having regular heats—more specifically, regular heats where Alphas tend to you—”

I growled. No other Alphas had better have touched our girl during her heat.

Cameron rubbed my bicep. “Shh, babe. It’s okay. We’re here for her now.”

“—this can sometimes happen,” Austin continued. “Spikes are rare, but they are more common for omegas with irregular, unmet heats. They’re sharper, quicker, and more painful, but it should only last a few hours.”

“Those Alpha Sex Ed classes they made you guys take really paid off,” Cam whispered.

Dylan swallowed. “Okay. Shit, *hours* of this. Stuck in here. Hiding.”

“We will stay with you, guard the door, do whatever you need to get you home safe after,” Austin said. “But, Firecracker....”

Fuck, he was going to say it. I tensed, and Cam gripped me tighter.

“You should know that if an Alpha tends to you during a spike, it will be over much, much quicker—and be so much less painful.”

She stared at him, her beautiful face flushed in his hands. “Right. Of course that’s how it works. Of course it is.”

“We would be honored to help you through your heat spike, Dylan,” he whispered, such tender hope in his deep voice. “But we will not pressure you. It’s your decision.”

Her gaze darted to Cam and me, questioning.

“I would be so honored, love,” I managed to say. “Let us take care of you.”

“I’ll make sure they behave,” Cam added.

She gave him an adorable little frown. “But I would want you, too, Cam.”

My heart leapt fifty feet into the air.

“Obviously, Blossom,” he replied, trying to play it cool while he was smiling like this was the greatest day of his life.

She looked at Austin again, a determined look on her face. “No knots. No biting. Nonnegotiable.”

“We would never, Firecracker,” he said. “I promise Seth and I have it together and are not nearing a rut, even now. I know you’ve figured out we’re both about on par with Derrick in power and dominance, and I bet he has ridiculous control.”

She cracked a smile. “He does, but I don’t want to talk about my brother when you’re about to make me come.”

Austin and I both growled, and even Cam had to stifle a moan.

“Okay then, baby girl,” Austin said, his fingers flexing around her chin with a little more force. “We’re going to treat you so fucking good and fix you right up. And then, very soon, after you’ve had a chance to settle, we are going to have a *long* talk about what you knew and when you knew it.”

There was dominant Austin, baring his teeth just a little bit, and he had every right. We had been mere weeks away from making the biggest mistake of our lives while our dream girl who was also our fucking *scent-matched* mate hid herself right under our noses.

Water under the bridge. She was ours now.

Dylan groaned, her muscles seizing. The spike was hurting her again, and I was helpless to do anything but shake loose from Cam and dive to her side.

“Seth,” she breathed, and she buried her face in my chest, taking a big, calming inhale of what I was sure was my *rioting* scent.

I stroked her hair. “I’m here, sweetheart. I’m here.”

Cam knelt on her other side, threading his fingers through hers. “Ready for us, Blossom?”

“Yes,” she breathed. She pulled her face from my shirt and turned to look at him. “Kiss me, Cameron.”

DYLAN

C am's answering smile alone probably could've cured all my pain. He dipped down and pressed his lips to mine in a gentle, probing kiss. I finally had the opportunity to run my fingers through that long, silky hair, and I took full advantage while he hummed appreciatively against my lips.

After not nearly long enough, he pulled away, dropping one last kiss on my nose. I moaned in protest, and he caressed my cheek with those long, nimble fingers. "Shh, Blossom. I'm not going anywhere, but I wanted to give Seth a taste of your luscious lips."

I looked at Seth over my other shoulder. His dark eyes were hooded as he searched my face, the thin silver hoop around his nostril shining the tiniest bit in the low light of the locker room.

I nodded my consent. He dove, rolling me to face him. His kiss was urgent, desperate—but somehow still gentle and loving. He was showing me his control, even with my perfume pumping into the air around us like a fog machine.

After a few toe-curling seconds of stroking my tongue with his, he released my lips, chuckling at my pout. "I know, love. I could do that all day, but I think we need to let Austin take the lead here before he self-combusts."

Austin still knelt at my feet, watching me with barely restrained hunger in those honey-brown eyes. He smiled, hopeful. "Would that be okay, Firecracker? Will you let me lead?"

There was so much still unsaid between all of us. I wasn't over the hurt I felt when I heard about their choosing gala. I hadn't suddenly changed my mind about accepting the life of an omega. This wasn't me saying that by allowing us to have this moment, we were one step away from bonding. Austin had been careful not to try to elicit any promises from me that would extend beyond the locker room door.

But when the rubber hit the road—and fuck, were the tires *screeching* against the pavement right now—I trusted Austin. I trusted Seth, and I definitely trusted Cam, the one person in this room whose hormones weren't in the driver's seat.

And goddamn it, I was in pain, and I needed them.

I *wanted* them.

I nodded, then I winced as another cramp rocked me. “Please, Austin.”

“Okay, baby girl,” he cooed, now rubbing a soothing hand on my thigh. “First, I want to make sure you're very comfortable. This is an excellent nest you've made for yourself in a pinch”—he gestured to the pile of towels I'd clawed down from a nearby shelf in a moment of desperation—“but I think we can make it just a little bit better.”

The omega was out of her cage and not going anywhere right now, and she preened at her Alpha's compliment on her nesting skills. Austin pinned me with his stare as he peeled his fleece jacket from his body, leaving me to ogle his muscles encased in a tight black T-shirt. He handed me the jacket, and I snatched it from him like a fiend. I buried my nose in it, mainlining his spicy cinnamon and whiskey, and then I tucked it up against my side on top of the pile of towels.

Seth and Cam immediately followed suit, shucking their jackets and positioning them around me so that I was surrounded by the sweet, harmonious smells of orange and spice and sugar and *man*.

“How's that, sweetheart?” Seth whispered, still stroking my hair.

“Mmm, better,” I said with a sigh. I leaned back, reclining onto my pile of jackets and towels, and I blanched as a bead of sweat trickled from my hairline and down my temple. “Hot, though.”

“I know, Firecracker,” Austin said. “A heat spike is still *heat*. Would it be okay if we helped you out of your clothes?”

That sounded great. “Mm-hmm.”

Seth and Cam helped me sit up for long enough to strip me of my vest and peel my sweater over my head. They laid me back into my towel pile, and then Austin slowly—too fucking slowly—untied my sneakers and began to unzip my jeans.

“Stop fucking around,” I growled at him.

He pulled my shoes off, dragged my jeans down my legs, then gave my bare thigh a light swat. “Behave, baby. You said I could be in charge, and I want to savor this.” He ran his heated gaze up and down my body, which was now clad in only my simple black bra and matching cotton panties. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Dylan.”

Seth vibrated next to me. He skimmed his rough fingertips down my throat and across my chest, just grazing the swell of my modest cleavage. “This is fucking heaven, love.”

“You *are* gorgeous, Blossom,” Cam added. He dropped another little kiss on my nose.

“Now,” Austin said, leaning back to sit on his heels. “Normally, it is the pack leader’s duty and privilege to be the first to tend to his omega. However, I am a benevolent leader, and I do love to spoil my brothers.”

Seth groaned, and Cam turned to give Austin the highest-wattage smile I’d ever beheld. “You are the *best*. I take back all the things I said earlier about strangling you with my bare hands.”

I frowned at him, the omega not liking that idea one bit. “You were fighting?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Austin replied. He motioned for Cam and Seth to step back, and then he made himself right at

home in my nest. He crawled behind me, tucking me between his massive thighs, and I sank into his chest like he was a comfy recliner. He pressed his lips to my ear. “Are you ready for Seth, Firecracker?”

I gasped as Seth knelt between my spread thighs. He lifted my bare leg and placed a sweet kiss to the inside of my knee, his dark eyes holding mine with searing intensity. He lowered my leg back to the floor, then he reached for my panties, hooking his tattooed fingers under the waistband. He raised a questioning eyebrow at me, and I should’ve been embarrassed of how fervently I nodded my assent, but the pulse of another cramp obliterated my shame.

Seth stripped my panties down my legs, and he snorted a laugh as Cam snatched them out of his hands.

“For safekeeping, Blossom,” Cam said, sliding them into his pocket. “Now, are you ready to find out how good Seth is at eating pussy?”

A little growl erupted from my chest.

“Shh, omega,” Austin rumbled against my ear. “Seth has never seen a prettier pussy than this one, and he isn’t planning on looking at any others. Right, brother?”

“So fucking right,” Seth replied, gaze glued between my thighs. “Is this slick for us, love?”

“You know it is,” I whined, squirming in Austin’s arms as another cramp hit.

“Seth,” Austin growled. “She’s hurting.”

Seth didn’t waste any more time. He dove, throwing my legs over his shoulders, and he buried his face in my pussy. He licked me, long and slow, and he moaned against my slippery, heated flesh. “Fuck, so good,” he rumbled.

“How’s she taste, babe?” Cam asked, scooting closer like he was going to evaluate Seth’s work.

“Like heaven.” He made several passes over my clit with his tongue, and the cramps became a simmering pressure in my core. I moaned, and he plunged his tongue inside me,

fucking me with it for a few blissful seconds before he pulled away, pushing up on his elbow to face Cam. “Come see.”

Cam leaned over my body and yanked Seth’s mouth to his. They shared a passionate kiss that I could only watch, wide-eyed and turned on beyond belief as Cam tasted *me* on Seth’s lips.

Groaning, Cam broke away and shoved Seth back toward his task. “Make her come now or I will. Fuck, Blossom, that was the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted.”

Seth chuckled. “Yes, sir,” he said, and then he did as he was told.

Sweet cinnamon and masculine spice enveloped me as Seth wrapped his lips around my clit and sucked. Two thick fingers found their way inside me, first gentle, then increasing to powerful thrusts. Pleasure coiled as Seth used his sinful mouth and skilled fingers to drive me higher and higher.

Austin grew hard against my back, but his hold on my arms remained gentle—firm, safe, but not restraining.

“Cameron,” he barked. He moved his hands to my chest and cupped my breasts gingerly, then he peeled the cups of my bra down, exposing my aching tits to the cool locker room air. “Make yourself useful.”

Cam grinned, leaning over to brush his lips lightly across the curve of my breasts. “Blossom, these are the most gorgeous tits I’ve ever seen.”

I willed away the worry that Austin and Seth wouldn’t feel the same about my B-cups. Cameron was a beta, so I expected his tit preference was varied, but Austin and Seth were programmed to crave an omega with a petite waist, big, full breasts, and enough curve to her hips to signal to the Alpha hindbrain that she was made for childbearing.

I lost that train of thought when Cam licked my tight nipple, then sucked it into his wicked mouth. He gave me gentle licks and sucks, moving between each breast to give them equal attention.

Seth increased the already intense pace of his fingers, *his* licks and sucks on my clit not gentle in the slightest, and I lost track of where I ended and he began.

“Come for us, Firecracker,” Austin whispered in my ear. “Come for your Alpha.”

The dam burst, washing the pain away. The most intense orgasm I’d ever experienced demolished me from the inside out. I screamed, and Seth groaned against my pussy, so pleased and so *male*.

It was a slow fall back to earth. I met Seth’s dark gaze as he watched me come down, still tucked between my legs like it was his home now. He winked at me with a cocky little grin before he pressed another light kiss to the inside of my thigh.

Cam gave my nipple one last little bite, moved higher to pop a kiss on my lips, then returned to his position kneeling at my side, still holding my hand.

“How are you feeling, baby girl?” Austin asked.

“Mmm, better. Only a little ache now.”

Austin *tsked*. “Well, that’s unacceptable. We can do better than that, can’t we, Cameron?”

Cam sucked in an excited gasp. “You mean it?”

“Ask Dylan.”

Cam elbowed Seth out of his spot between my thighs. Seth just laughed and took up a new post next to Cam on the other side of my leg, leaving a warm, soothing hand on my thigh.

“Blossom,” Cam said, his big blue eyes sincere and hopeful. “You said no knots, and that was a very reasonable and wise decision. But, as luck would have it, I possess a very fine dick with no knotting abilities whatsoever.”

“It is a very fine dick,” Seth agreed.

“Thank you. I also received a clean bill of health on my last physical for work.”

I considered him. Austin’s mouth found the curve of my neck, and he held my tits in his hands with such care, like he

thought they could shatter at any moment.

“Are you asking if you can fuck me, Cameron?” I asked with an amused smile.

He nodded, returning my smile with a sexy one of his own. “Trust me, Blossom. I *can* fuck you so good, you’ll decide you don’t even need to try out a knot. But I’m asking if I *may* fuck you, with your express permission. And not because you’re in so much pain that you feel like it’s the only choice you have to end your suffering, but because I’m Cam, you’re my Blossom, and me fucking you while Seth and Austin watch sounds like a thing you would really enjoy.”

It sure did sound like a thing I would really enjoy, and at this point, I wasn’t even sure if that was more me or the omega talking.

Chin up, Dylan. You’re not a scared little virgin, and they need to be very aware of that.

I held Cam’s smoldering gaze. “Show it to me.”

Austin growled against my neck. “Fuck, baby.”

Cam’s grin spread from ear to ear. “You wanna see my dick, Blossom?”

“Yes. Show me what you’re going to fuck me with, Cameron.”

Seth was looking at me like he’d never seen me before for about the third time tonight. “Am I dreaming this?”

I looked at him, a command in my stare. “I want you to put it in me.”

“Fuck me forty ways to Sunday, Dylan,” Seth snarled, his nostrils flaring and his jaw grinding like he was teetering on the precipice of control. “I can’t believe you’re real.”

Cam chuckled. “Excuse him. He’s usually so much smoother, but he’s been presented with his every dream come true right here in this locker room, Blossom. You minx.”

My pussy clenched with need. “*Cameron.*”

“Yes, ma’am.” Cam unzipped his jeans, and I admired the sinewy lines of his tanned hands and muscular forearms as he moved. He produced what was indeed a very fine, very hard dick. He was long, his silky skin just a shade darker than his golden tan, with just the right amount of girth that said he’d be a snug fit without breaking me in half.

He stroked himself for me, eyes hooded and grin smug. “Do I pass, Blossom?”

“It’s perfect, Cam,” I said. A tiny cramp bloomed, reminding me that I still had work to do before I was truly through this spike. “Need you now, please.”

Seth reached between us, swatted Cam’s hand away, and wrapped a colorful hand around Cam’s length. He stroked him a few times, slowly and totally for my viewing pleasure, and I bit my lower lip at the sight.

“You’re both lucky Dylan’s so into you touching each other,” Austin said. “Or else I’d be disappointed in how long you’re taking to fuck this beautiful woman I’m holding in my arms after she expressly requested that you do so.”

Seth rolled his eyes at his brother. “Do we need to worry about her getting pregnant?”

“No. A heat spike isn’t a fertile time for an omega. Only a true heat.”

Great to know my years of burying my head in the sand about what I was had left me with some embarrassing holes in my knowledge of how omega biology worked. “I also have a contraceptive implant,” I volunteered.

Austin released a deep growl against my back, but he smothered it quickly. His Alpha side was programmed to *breed*, so I’d probably chafed him a little with that news.

Good. I wasn’t a fucking baby factory—yet another thing they all needed to wrap their minds around.

“Of course you do,” he said. “So resourceful, our girl.”

“Seth,” Cam snapped. “I am about to die. Do what Blossom told you to do.”

Seth chuckled at his mate's distress, but he didn't protest. He notched Cam's cock at my entrance, and then he guided him expertly inside. I was still so wet from coming on Seth's face that Cam slid right in to the hilt, and we both groaned together as he filled me up.

"Oh, Blossom," Cam purred as he began to rock his hips against me. He gripped my ass, lifting my lower half out of Austin's lap so he could work his magic, grinding himself right against the most sensitive spot inside me. "You are perfect."

I was going to come again with embarrassing speed.

"Cam," I gasped. "Don't stop. I'm so close."

He began to drive into me, blurring the lines of our bodies and sending my brain offline. Seth's fingers found my clit, and he rubbed me in tight, perfect circles like he'd already unlocked my cheat codes after using his tongue on me all of one time.

Reality cracked, the heat bubbling under my skin evaporated, and all echoes of pain ceased as another orgasm ripped through me. I shrieked Cam's name as Seth's fingers worked me and Austin held me in his unyielding grip. Cam groaned his own release, his fingers digging roughly into the flesh of my ass while he murmured my name like a prayer.

As I regained my faculties, Cam gently pulled out of me and zipped his beautiful dick back behind his pants. Seth procured a fresh towel and used it to clean me up, dabbing the remnants of sweat from my body before wiping Cam's and my release from between my thighs.

I sighed, content. I felt better than I had in weeks. A low rumble sounded from Austin's chest, and I sank into the soft vibration of his body.

He was purring for me.

"You were beautiful, Firecracker," he said. "Do you feel better now?"

"Yes. The pain is gone, and I don't feel like I'm melting."

Seth squeezed my thigh. “You’re not perfuming anymore. You still smell... fucking amazing, but we can probably get you off campus without attracting too much attention.”

Shit. Getting out of here was going to be... complicated.

With great reluctance, I crawled out of Austin’s lap and stood up. Cam, pouting, handed me my panties. I righted my bra and quickly pulled on the rest of my clothes as well as my shoes. Austin and Seth mobilized, bundling the nest towels and shoving them down the nearby laundry chute. Cam produced an aerosol can of de-scenter from a supply cabinet—*thanks again, OFS*—and fumigated the area as best he could.

The guys donned their jackets, then Austin held up my vest. I turned and slid my arms through, shrugging it on. He zipped me up and then spun me around to face him. I found myself caught once again by the ferocity of his amber eyes as he wrapped a firm hand around the back of my neck.

He kissed me. Hard, demanding, a little angry.

I took it all. I wanted it. I wanted his anger, because I had some of my own to give.

He ripped his mouth from mine. “We’re going to talk. *Now.*”

DYLAN

I straightened my spine. “Fine. Not in here.”

The de-scenter had helped, but the smell of sex and perfume and raging Alpha pheromones lingered. We needed fresher air and clearer heads.

I marched through the locker room door and out onto the pool deck. The chlorine in the air would zap the last of our sex-riddled pheromones from our noses, so I stopped near the diving platform to suck in a few deep breaths.

The three of them followed me out and fell into formation in front of me. Austin stood in the middle while Seth and Cam took up their usual positions—flanking Austin just behind his shoulders. The natatorium was dark, but moonlight streamed through the high windows just enough to illuminate the hard lines of their bodies and the tension on their handsome faces.

I held my head high under the weight of their stares. I felt clear-headed and strong, and I was still the Dylan they’d first met in the St. James & Co. store all those weeks ago, even though they might not see it that way.

Even though they’d just found me at my most vulnerable and turned it into the hottest thing I’d ever experienced in my life.

“First, I’ll state the obvious,” Austin said, crossing his arms over his chest. “You are an omega.”

I took up a mirror pose. “Yes.”

“You’ve been taking suppressants to hide your designation... the whole time?”

I nodded. “Since I presented at thirteen.”

“And thank fuck for that,” Seth said, slanting a warning look at Austin. “If you’d been on the USDPU registry, we’d have lost you years ago.”

“Very true,” Austin said. “We’re unbelievably grateful you were able to do that, Dylan. Do not misunderstand me.”

“Thank you for your blessing regarding my life choices.”

“Dylan.” Austin growled my name like a warning. “Did you know we were a scent match?”

I narrowed my eyes at his tone. “I suspected. I know for sure now, obviously.”

Cam’s big eyes were so hopeful, I had to fight the urge to go to him. “Even me, Blossom?”

I softened. “Even you, Cam. You smell like so much more than just beta citrus to me. And you have Seth’s cinnamon.”

He lit up, but Austin wasn’t going to let us get off-track.

“How long did you suspect?” he asked.

“From the first day.”

Austin clenched his jaw and ran a frustrated hand down his face. “Were you ever planning to tell us?”

I glared at him. It was a fair question, and I understood his frustration, but I wouldn’t be made to feel like I’d done something wrong. “I don’t know, Austin. I spent one lovely week getting to know you guys. I grew feelings for each of you as we destroyed our enemies together. I thought you might’ve been growing feelings for me, too, and maybe if we’d continued down that road.... Maybe there’s a world in which we spent enough time together that we developed deep trust and even *love* between us, and then it would’ve felt safe and *right* revealing this thing about me that would completely change my life forever. This thing that my family and I have been taking great pains and insane *risk* to hide for almost a

decade.” I paused, and I made sure Austin was looking me in the eyes as I hammered the nail. “But you *left*. You left, and you never came back.”

“Fuck,” Seth swore, throwing his hands up and beginning to pace.

Cam was now glaring at both Seth and Austin. “I told you. I told you both it was the wrong decision!”

“Dylan,” Austin growled. “That is not fair—”

“You didn’t choose me, Austin. You chose *them*.” I waved a hand in the direction of the party.

“Well, we are sure the fuck choosing you *now*,” he snapped.

“No,” I snapped back. “You’re not. You’re choosing my *biology*.”

Seth stopped pacing. “Dylan, come on—”

“I don’t want this, Seth. I don’t want you to want me just for my fucking hormones and my scent. I don’t want to be an omega—kept, shackled, *bred*—”

“You cannot think we would treat you like that,” Seth said, raising his voice. “I know it was only a week, Dylan, but you can’t tell me you think we’d be like those fucking abusive asshole packs you’ve been saving your girls from.”

I sighed. “No, I don’t think that about you guys. I promise I don’t. But there are many kinds of shackles for an omega. You’ve seen the kind of life I live—no Alpha pack in their right mind would be comfortable with their bonded omega breaking down a door in a pack house and getting into a fistfight with a grown-ass Alpha in a rage.”

Austin shut his eyes, rolling his neck and huffing out a harsh breath. “That is... yes, that is not something we would have contemplated *before we met you*.”

“Blossom,” Cam asked, his voice cracking along with my heart. “Do you not want us?”

“I...” I looked at him, imploring him to understand. “I’m sorry, Cam. I did. I do? And please don’t think that what we just shared in the locker room didn’t mean anything to me. You were all perfect in that moment. But I want to be wanted for *who* I am—not *what* I am. And you guys are only standing here in front of me now because my contact lost his suppressant hookup in Mexico three weeks ago and you happened to stumble into my heat spike tonight.”

“Dylan, this is nonsense,” Austin said angrily. His dominance was pulsing through the room and winning the battle with the chlorine in the air. “You are not walking away from us after this. You are *ours*. Our omega.”

“I don’t *belong* to anyone, Austin,” I snapped. “I am not your pack’s fucking property just because our scents are compatible.”

“That’s not what he means, Blossom,” Cam said. “You have to understand, this whole thing with the choosing gala wasn’t our idea—”

“You left me, Cam! You held me in your arms after my store had been torn apart by rabid assholes, and told me you’d always come when I needed you. And then you *left*.”

They all stared at me, silent for a few long seconds. Cam, who’d looked so sad throughout this entire conversation, had suddenly hardened—resolute, determined, and serious.

“I did, Blossom. But I won’t be leaving you again.”

Seth nodded, crossing his arms over his chest and staring me down. “I’m sorry for how this went down, love. But I’m *not* sorry to tell you that I won’t be letting you go.”

Austin began to prowl forward, inching into my personal space. “You can run from me, Dylan, but I will catch you. I know you’re angry, but you withheld some pretty fucking vital information from us. We did not have all the facts when we made the decision we did. We almost made the biggest mistake of our lives, and you were going to let us.”

I jammed my finger into his chest. “Don’t you fucking try to blame me for your shit. You wanted the OFS princess, not

the beta from the hardware store.”

Austin smiled, almost taunting me. “You don’t know what you think you do, Firecracker.”

Time was up. I’d had enough.

I ripped my hand away from his chest and stalked toward the exit doors.

“Dylan, get your ass back here!” Austin yelled.

I threw my middle finger up over my shoulder. “I’m going home!”

The sound of boots stomping on the pool deck meant they were coming after me. I shoved the doors open and burst into the cold night air.

Just in time to find Derrick stalking up the grassy hill and onto the steps leading to the natatorium doors.

Uh-oh.

The guys ran out behind me. “Dylan—”

Derrick crested the stairs.

He looked at me.

He looked at the guys where they congregated at my back.

His nostrils flared, and his eyes widened in horrified understanding.

Then they narrowed into angry slits.

“You motherfuckers.”

Shit. I ran at him, slamming my palms into his chest before he could charge Austin. Aggression leaked into the air, cloying and thick.

“Stop it, Derrick,” I barked.

“They took advantage of you, Dylan,” he snarled.

I could feel Austin crowding my back. “We absolutely fucking did not,” he snapped.

“They didn’t, Derrick, I promise. I was fully lucid, and I consented. I would’ve been stuck in there for hours otherwise.”

Austin moved even closer behind me. “Dylan, we are not finished talking.”

“Yes the fuck you are,” Derrick barked. “Back off, Bryce.”

I turned, keeping one hand on Derrick’s chest and holding the other out to stop Austin from advancing further. Seth and Cam were back at their posts on his flanks, Seth eyeing Derrick with nearly the same amount of aggression as Austin was, while Cam had his deep blue gaze glued to me.

“I said I was going home,” I announced. “Are you three going to try to stop me? Try to prevent me from going where I want to go and doing what I want to do?”

“Goddamn it, Dylan,” Seth said. “Of course we aren’t. Let us get you home safe, okay?”

“Unnecessary,” Derrick replied. “I’ve got her. Do not follow us, or I will take great pleasure in breaking each of your pretty faces so the *omegas* you were interviewing this evening will cross you off their lists.”

“Derrick, I get why you’re pissed,” Austin growled, “but if you threaten my pack again, you and I are going to have some fucking words.”

Derrick grinned like a maniac. “I look forward to it.”

I needed to separate these two before there was a brawl on the OFS lawn. “Derrick, take me home, please.”

“Gladly.”

He grabbed my arm and began to drag me away. During planning, we’d identified a side entrance by the dorms with a gate that was easily scaled, so at least I wouldn’t have to sneak back through that godawful party smelling like I’d just rolled around in the sex pheromones of the fabled Bryce Pack.

I glanced over my shoulder at the guys one last time. “Thank you for your help tonight,” I hollered, and then I added, to be petty, “Enjoy the rest of your speed dating!”

Cam just smiled at me. “See you soon, Blossom.”

Seth blew me a kiss.

Austin’s stare was calculating, searing my skin as I tried to flee. “Until next time, Firecracker.”

I didn’t know what they had in store for me, but if they thought they were just going to bulldoze me into being their compliant little omega, I was going to fuck up their world.

I was Dylan St. James, and I was nobody’s second choice. I wouldn’t be caged by bonds, and I wouldn’t become a slave to my body just because I’d scent-matched to three beautiful and dangerous men.

They would learn, and I’d have to be the one to teach them.

TO BE CONTINUED...



Dylan’s story concludes in Book 2, [Dylan St. James: Omega Revealed](#). Want a sneak peek of Chapter 1? Sign up for [my newsletter!](#)



If you enjoyed Dylan’s vibe, you’ll love Jolie Knight, the heroine in my dark academy Why Choose trilogy, A [Knight’s Revenge](#).

If you’re craving a paranormal shifter romance with another tough-as-nails heroine, try [Mave Fortune](#).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ducks

Don't throw your Kindle at me! Book 2 is right around the corner, I swear, and the spice will be *spicing* once we get everyone sorted out. I mean it—I know you came here for knots, and Dylan will have her knots... eventually.

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And yes—I was definitely in my *Eras* era while I wrote this series.

See y'all in Book 2!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Dear is the super-secret alter ego of a chick who just wants a little romance and adventure in her life every now and then. She's writing the books she would want to read as an indie romance fanatic and voracious reader and is developing her brand of smart-mouthed heroines, sexy supportive men, and strong family bonds. She loves ALL the tropes and only hopes you enjoyed the ride. Please follow her at the links below to keep up with the latest news.

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